UNCERTAINTY AND THE ORGANIZATION OF STREET VENDING BUSINESSES

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Introduction

This paper reports preliminary findings about how households organize street vending businesses in response to varying sources and degrees of uncertainty. The thesis is that households organize themselves in different ways in response to different types of uncertainty associated with 1) earning different types of income and 2) differences as well as changes in intra-household relationships. The important findings are twofold: first, that household members earn income from both "formal" and "informal" sources BOTH sequentially and simultaneously. The second finding is that people coordinate the efforts of household members with respect to (un)certainty to keep income flowing from the income-earning activities the members are practicing. I review some empirical work on the informal economy and follow this discussion with data from Chicago's Maxwell Street Market.

Theorizing the Organization of Street Vending

There are some detailed descriptions of the organization of street vending in industrialized society (Jones, 1988; McGee, 1977). However, the organization of these activities is not theorized. Instead, investigators usually focus on why people become vendors in the context of the political economy of formalization and informalization (McGee, 1977; Perlman, 1976; Ferman et. al. 1987; Portes et. al., 1989; Smith and Wallerstein, 1992).

Jones (1988) presents ethnographic evidence indicating that Black entrepreneurs have adapted business organization, marketing techniques and capital formation to the absence of Black-owned retail business in Black neighborhoods. She details three peddlers' operations: a mobile peddler who is selling from a panel van, a
sedentary peddler selling clothes from sidewalk displays, and a small retailer who "graduated" from peddling. She provides no details regarding these vendors' households; her presumption is that vending is organized autonomously from other household relationships. She provides passable detail of what the vendors sell, and why, as well as a sketch of some ties between vendor-supplier and vendor-customer. For instance she notes that the mobile peddler cultivates relationships with children in his target neighborhoods to minimize the chance of theft while selling.

However, Jones' analysis does not lead to an inquiry or theorization of common organizational characteristics of the three vendors. She claims that none of these vendors use professional services because the vendors are "structurally isolated." She does not indicate what that "isolation" has to do with entrepreneurship. Is it business people's choice? Or is it some purposeful choice by service providers? Or what? She emphasizes the irregular employment histories of the three vendors. But is this an artifact or cause of "structural isolation"? In effect she implicitly suggests that peddling is the only stable occupation available to these people and further, that people with stable employment histories will not be found peddling. Structural isolation happens "to" people, but who makes the notion meaningful, and how? What practices of vendors and service providers give this notion force?

Szanton reports detailed ethnographic data regarding inter-vendor cooperation and conflict. She sees vending as culturally embedded in other social relationships such as kinship. However, her work emphasizes the contingent and geographically specific way that broad types of kin relationships are interpreted. As a result, her work seeks no summary considerations regarding the importance of particular social bonds between vendors, or between consumers and vendors. Instead the extraordinarily contingent nature of social and economic relationships is emphasized. But are decision-making processes this contingent? I believe we can find some common sources of information and habits that are co-determinate. However, we must
look to people's interaction and language, how they make decisions or habits to develop theory that systematizes superficially disparate interaction.

The literature is not clear about how to account for the organization of business practices, but some clues are offered. First, (un)certainty in business practices can come from street vendors relations to "service providers" or other sources external to the household's business. Examples of such could include accountants, police, or other business people. Second, kinship relations or employees can also be a source of (un)certainty to street vending businesses. Broadly speaking, there are two sources of (un)certainty: interactions and information from household members or employees, and interactions and information from outsiders. We can hypothesize that vendors will respond differently to different sources of (un)certainty; and they will respond differently to different degrees of (un)certainty.³

Periodic or irregular (un)certainty prompts vendors to routinize or create habits for the interactions they can control. More specifically, with respect to vending, household members will routinize aspects of vending that present the most risk or that create the most intra-household conflict. When possible, household members will decide to concentrate those most problematic aspects of vending in the fewest household members' hands possible. These predictions, routinization or the creation of habits and concentration are powerful, but not novel. However, I locate these outcomes as aspects of complicated information and decision-making processes at the individual level instead of the result of "cultural" differences or "structural" characteristics.

For instance, routinization of vending does not preclude conflict within other activities practiced in the household. However, well-run vending helps ameliorate conflicts over other practices. Vending and those members of households who vend are not hermetically sealed from other household members. This fuzziness of decision-making is not something to avoid; instead it is important to assess how
household members not directly involved with vending are often sources of information for the habits and decisions made by vending members of the household. Finally, there is also ambiguity over time with regard to membership in vending "households." Household demographics change as do the items sold by a business. So decision-making analysis must show why decision-making practices change as well as accounting for the fact that some "household" businesses include vendors with different street addresses than other vendors.

In this paper I provide data on how households organize street vending under various types and degrees of uncertainty and relate this data to organizational theories of uncertainty.

Time and Place and People and Method

The Maxwell Street Market was among the oldest open-air public markets in the United States. Early Irish, Bohemian and German immigrants founded the Maxwell Street neighborhood. But Russian Jews, emigrating to escape the pogroms, replaced them in the Maxwell Street area towards the turn of the century. Many of the new immigrants heavily turned to street vending and pushcart peddling as a way to gain a foothold in the urban economy. This activity was centered in the Maxwell Street area to serve co-ethnic customers. The location was also proximate to suppliers of merchandise. According to Eastwood (1991), the open air market of Maxwell Street began as an accumulation of Jewish pushcart peddlers who began selling in the area after the Chicago Fire of 1871.

The Market attracted poor immigrants as vendors and as shoppers and the ethnic mix changed to become heavily Afro-American and Latino. A description of the Market, by the famous sociologist Louis Wirth, applied in the 1990s as it did in 1928.

"Maxwell Street, the ghetto's great outdoor market, is full of color, action, shouts, odors, and dirt. It resembles a medieval European fair... Its origins are to be sought in the traditions of the Jews... To those traditions correspond also
the traditions of other national groups who form their clientele." (Wirth 1928 cited in Eastwood 1991).

In August of 1994 the Market was closed by the City of Chicago, an analysis of the events surrounding the closure and subsequent relocation is partly found in Morales et.al. (1994). Street vending and flea markets have recently become popular subjects in the press (Brown, 1990; Burns, 1992; The Economist, 1984; Mahany, 1991; Moffat, 1991), and the choice to vend obviously has ramifications for people, politicians and businesses in urban areas around the country (Berger and Connelly, 1991; Beyette, 1990; Fein, 1992; Levine, 1992; Schmich, 1990; Schneider, 1988; Tobar, 1990).

In this paper the focus is on street vendors and how they organized household members to control uncertainty in their vending businesses. The data for this project was gathered during three years of fieldwork (1989-92). During these three years, I became acquainted with many vendors: I worked for them occasionally, swapped stories and merchandise with them, and made some money from my own business. For a period of 20 months I vended at the Market. I was licensed by the City, although many vendors vended with a dated license or without a license at all. In the course of vending and observing I took photographs, drew maps, examined archival and contemporary municipal ordinances, and developed an interview guide for later use. As a vendor I adopted the mind set of a participant by practicing their lifestyle. This practice legitimized my presence in both vendors' and consumers' eyes, and gave me insight into the vendors' lifestyle and day-to-day circumstances. I sold used items for eight months and new bathroom accessories the remaining 12 months. I set up my business in eight different parts of the Market in order to examine differences in vending practices among the various ethnic groups. During a period of 86 Sundays, I vended for 83. Becoming a vendor also permitted me to check interview information by collecting and reflecting on my experience, while making reasoned inferences regarding that experience.
During and immediately after my business experience I interviewed members of 56 households, formally interviewing more than 100 people. I sampled to include variation in vendor ethnicity, gender, age and household composition. Of the people interviewed, 19 households were Spanish speaking, 24 were black, 11 were white, and two were Asian. These interviews were open-ended, but directed from an interview guide. The questions were translated to Spanish and back-translated to English. Interviews with Asians were conducted in English only. My field notes include hundreds of informal conversations and observations on everything from my state of mind to the myriad of everyday Market activities. This paper utilizes only part of this data as the project, and the data analysis, is ongoing.

Discussion

I. Effects of Outside Interactions on Organization

Constraints caused by outsiders may involve much or little uncertainty. The following are examples of organizing in response to external constraints involving little (un)certainty, followed by others involving more (un)certainty. In all cases we are looking for information about how the organization of vending varies with (un)certainty as evidenced by how participants communicate their perceptions to each other and establish habits or routines as a result

A. External Constraints Causing Little Uncertainty

One external constraint that effects the organization of the business but that involves little uncertainty is the characteristics of the merchandise sold.

1) Mario Sanchez is a member of a household that sells sandpaper and other abrasive materials at the Market. His younger brother, Fernando, works at the company where they acquire the sandpaper, as does his father. The Sanchez family first began to vend used items rummaged from the family’s home and sold at another flea market in the city. The family found income-earning potential in vending. The
boys' father, Julio Sanchez, approached his employer for the opportunity to sell surplus material and he rapidly made a deal with the factory owner for a regular supply of sandpaper and other abrasives. This demonstrates how income-earning opportunities can be sequentially tied to waged or salaried employment (see also Ditton, 1977). Mario talks about how his father first negotiated the deal:

[The owner] started talking with my dad, he had a lot of surplus so he told my dad, "Here take this if you want, you can sell this at the flea market and just pay me little by little. Just pay so much money for this." So we just started from there getting more and more stuff and that's it.

The surplus materials they sell are usually imperfect, but like many blemished items, they can hardly be distinguished from brand-new. Of interest is the low risk associated with the acquisition and sale of this merchandise; a simple, firm-like deal was executed between the employer and one employee to begin the flow of goods. The family purchased the box of a 16-foot panel van to store the merchandise and a late model "Suburban"-type passenger vehicle was pressed into service to ferry merchandise to a swap-meet and later, the Market.

After high school and short employment in two other wage labor jobs, Fernando was hired by the factory at the request of his father, a 20-year employee. At work Fernando is in charge of the factory's loading dock. His is an opportunity for simultaneously working for his household and his employer. Supervising the loading dock, he is able to start and maintain relationships with suppliers of other potential merchandise. For instance, special kinds of abrasive bits or supplies that the factory wholesales can also be sold to the Sanchez family for resale. Opportunities occur frequently four or five times each month but only a few develop into relationships with income-earning potential. However, it is noteworthy that the opportunities come to the Sanchez family; they avoid the time and effort otherwise needed to establish and maintain contacts.

Fernando related one opportunity that has been a benefit since some material purchased at the factory is new, first quality, and a bit expensive:
Fernando: Well I know this one guy who does this for a living, he sells sandpaper to body shops. He goes from body shop to body shop and I talked with him and asked him, "Where do you get this?" He says, "Well go here and ask this guy, call that guy and tell them to give you my price, [tell them] that I recommended you." So I call 'em all and told them and they give me a good price.

Alfonso: How did you meet this guy?

Fernando: Well he goes to the company where I work, he's been doing this for years now, every day, almost. He goes into the company and buys stuff, and cause I'm shipping and receiving there, he would always talk to me. I would ask him and talk to him, you know and bullshit with him and I ask him where can I get this, – and he says talk to this guy...

Notice that the opportunity to obtain the merchandise is located in the particular job of loading dock worker. Particularly important is how Fernando alone bore the weight of additional product acquisition. His routine handling of suppliers freed other members' time and effort to deal with other household problems or other aspects of the vending business. Developing an income-earning relationship is an uncertain part of the vending business. So the household member with the potential contacts becomes the one most likely to make deals for merchandise. But notice also the simultaneous opportunity to practice both wage labor and entrepreneurial opportunities.

B. Involvement in Illegal Activity

An external constraint that involves a high degree of uncertainty is the risk of having ones business activities interfered with by the police. If vendors acquire merchandise illegally, sell stolen goods or in other ways break the law, they are more likely to have their business interrupted. Because vendors engaged in illegal activities face greater uncertainty than those who comply with the law, they organize their businesses differently to reduce risk.
1) Ace sells "used" bicycles and tools, as well as large shop implements and occasionally new household electronics, like stereos or speakers. He is the center of a large network of suppliers. He is employed full-time at a local operation of a national meat processing company. Ace limits the risk of being caught by elaborately organizing his assets. He commonly carries a beeper in order to allow him to stay in touch with whomever is privileged to know that number. His home phone number is unlisted, and he actually gets his personal mail at an address in a suburb. Furthermore, his personal vehicles and the firearms he owns are registered to his name at a third Chicago address. The merchandise he sells is stored in buildings he rehabilitates and rents with the profits from vending (among other income earning ventures). These extraordinary precautions are taken due to the risks associated with selling used, probably stolen, products. Ace’s incredibly intricate organization of his vending practice involves no other household members directly, although his son, daughters and fiancee always know how to reach him. He runs his business himself. In the past, his son occasionally accompanied him, however, Ace’s son recently got a job with the railroad that precludes his working the Market on Sundays. Ace minimizes risks by elaborately organizing the supply and storage of merchandise as well as other aspects of his personal life and by isolating his activities from those of other household members.

Ace also limits the use of the profit he makes. Most of the money goes for luxury items for him or the purchase of HUD buildings which he rehabilitates and rents out. In these buildings he stores most of the merchandise he sells. Ace makes all the decisions about the business, takes all the risks, and allocates the income according to his own wishes, all irrespective of the needs of household members or changes in the household composition.

2) Flavio also knows that the items he sells are possibly stolen goods. However, he shared his display space with his wife who earned money with her clothing resale business, with no ambiguity regarding the legality of the merchandise. Since his merchandise may be stolen,
he never permits anyone to make purchases for him, even though, unlike Ace, the relationship he has with his suppliers would allow anyone he charged with purchase responsibilities to make the acquisitions. Like Ace, Flavio responded to risk associated with merchandise acquisition. Since items were probably "hot," he limited family members exposed to risk, but this also limited the people who can make deals for him. Additionally, Flavio preferred to sell items himself. Very rarely did a person approach him to say that an item he was selling once belonged to that person and was stolen. In those cases Flavio liked to sell the item for some amount of money, but he was also careful not to offend the customer. His standing order for his son or uncle was to sell or give the item away quickly. The risk of eroding his relationship with the police is too great.

Frances, Flavio's wife, was not afraid of any household members selling her merchandise with her or for her. Nor was she concerned with her clientele. The merchandise was all purchased wholesale, the prices known and easily learned. Flavio on the other hand, did not have particular prices for items. His acquisitions were typically one price for a large assortment of used tools. Depending on the merchandise, he might make his purchase price back with the sale of only two or three items. More typically both made up their investments slowly, after selling many items.

Under conditions of uncertainty, household involvement in the risky activity is strictly limited, while under conditions of little uncertainty, more family members are involved in various aspects of the business.  

II. Organizing in Response to Uncertainties Caused By Household and Business Members

In addition to uncertainties from external sources, the household composition is a source of (un)certainty for having a street vending business. The household composition affects the allocation of labor within the business. For a household to have a vending business, several kinds of household labor commitments must be negotiated.
and agreed upon. For some household members these commitments are not so much discussed as assumed, but in other households the members make various explicit arrangements. Vending requires labor, acquiring merchandise, and selling it while at the same time maintaining the household. Things like child care, substitute vendors for those ill or taking vacations, and formal employment demands are types of problems household coordination has to cope with. In general, the more frequent or more differentiated the interactions, the higher the "coordination constraint." In every household the supply of labor for vending depends on the household composition as well as the structure of each member's ongoing time commitments. Household composition has three components: the gender mix, the age mix, and the number of members. In the examples that follow we see how these different "coordination constraints" are worked out.

A. Constraints Involving Little Uncertainty

Where there is little uncertainty, we expect to find stable expectations, habits, and few if any interactions required for the week-to-week business operations. Habits may have been founded on intra-household conflict or even as a source of responding to ongoing conflict in a household. In households of one person, especially when vending is the sole source of earned income, there is a weak coordination constraint. This is because that person deploys their time flexibly according to their own whim, subject to the constraint that they cannot be two places at once. However, if these households employ wage labor or others in support of the business, this introduces new uncertainty.

1) Lupe's husband always hated her vending at the Market. But she vended because she had vended with her parents all her life and she loved it, and because it is a source of income that is stable and allowed her to be with her children during the week. But her husband of 11 years could not understand why Lupe will not behave like a "normal" housewife. His expectation was for her to stay home and never take up earning income:
My husband wants me to be like other families. He doesn’t understand that "normal" changes and what he was used to is not what I was used to. My mom always had to work. With vending we’re making it. And I can still stay home with the kids...

Nonetheless, Lupe’s socialization into work outside the household combined with her desire to care for her children is one reason for her to vend and to continue supportive vending routines.

Lupe’s merchandise was mainly new baby and First Communion-type clothes and accessories. She established the supplier contacts over the course of her life and only she could make the purchases. Because she displayed her goods with her parents’ display space, she had no need for extra labor watching against thieves. Over the 20+ years she had vended with her parents, they established habitual routines for every contingency, from illness to vacations. These habits are a source of comfort and flexibility in the face of her spouse’s open distinterest and continual belligerence.

Lupe’s desire to support the two oldest children in parochial schools at $7000 per year competes with her husband’s desire to have a wife with whom he can go out on Saturday nights. This forces Lupe to defend vending as an income source and her insistence requires him to care for their children on Sunday to permit her to vend. Neither finds this working solution particularly attractive, and it is a source of occasional conflict, but it has become habitual for both and she and her husband learned to live with this tension.

2) We can contrast Lupe’s situation with Pancho’s. His wife takes on the household child care on the weekend to permit him to vend. The agreement was taken for granted and required little interaction; both marked it up to the household needing more income and her "preferred" interest in caring for the home and children. Both Pancho and his wife work during the week. Child care during the week is the responsibility of Pancho’s sister-in-law who also lives in the home. Pancho then has a low "coordination constraint," due as much to the assumed gendered division of labor as anything else.
3) In the Sanchez household, the "old man" Gus originally motivated his sons to start vending with him. Over time the children grew older and the business more profitable. The four boys began to take initiatives in the practice of business. Some of them found girlfriends, of whom some, over time, became wives. With these demographic changes, aging and the formation of new households, different demands grew on members of the vending business and new ambitions formed among the vendors. In short, even without changes to the supply of goods, these demographic changes increased interaction that household members had to cope with and, as a result, they formed new habits. For instance, the household's initial vending display, at a Chicago drive-in theater, was augmented by a second vending location at the Market. The new business sold the same merchandise, sandpaper, initially, but with girlfriends and wives available for some Sunday work, decisions had to be made with regard to two issues: 1) what to sell and 2) who would get up early to vend at the Market. Mario and I discussed these issues:

Mario: It goes back to what my father was saying, you have to have a lot of patience. You'll have weeks when you don't do anything and weeks that you are real proud. We look back to that first day, 80 bucks oh wow. Now that's what one person gets in one week. But still that was our first week and for me that was the best week that we've had. Not because of the profit. But especially because us four, we got together. We did this. It was a family thing. And that, a lot of people don't understand that family is one thing and business is another. In our family my father was the one who gave the orders. He tells us what we can and cannot do. But in business everybody has a say. We're all alike, stockholders. If I didn't want to sell baby stuff then I can say that. At least I got my point across. If the majority says, "Let's go with it." Then we do.

Alfonso: Like your father doesn't have any more say so then anyone else?

Mario: Yea, he don't. We do a lot of like, lobbying. Say we don't want to sell baby clothes. I go and talk to him (Fernando), and he says, "Yea." Then I go to my sister, "Come on we won't have to do this or that..." Until I get most people on my side. Then when they (other household members) say, "What do you want to sell?" Then we say we don't want to sell, OK so majority rules.
Alfonso: How often do you meet?

Mario: About once a month everybody who sells gets together and sits around saying, "This is what we're planning on doing, this is how much money we've done, we got these bills, this is what we got to reinvest, what do you want to do?" Then we take a vote. See there was a point when we were just gonna stop selling. But we all got together and worked out everybody's differences.

Alfonso: What was the problem?

Mario: We had problems with who was gonna wake up early. We worked it out because it is very important to do things the way it should be done. As opposed to having a dictatorship, that says: "This is what you got to do."

Alfonso: What other kinds of problems did you have?

Mario: That was the main problem, nobody wants to get up at 2 or 3 in the morning just to go to the flea market and sell. Oh man, nobody in their right mind, oh wow! Alfonso: So how did you resolve that?

We did two groups, and we switch who goes first. You see, the whole thing started two years ago and that was the biggest problem we ever had, who was gonna wake up, besides that, business-wise, no troubles.

When the boys were young, "dad" made the rules. With time, the business expanded to the Market as the members gained experience. This expansion triggered a time-consuming crisis and argumentative interactions, but the household developed a "fair" form of allocating labor and making business decisions. The monthly meetings that the households have are now habitual interactions, playful as well as business-like. But this solution was founded on conflict, rooted finally in demographic change. Utilizing the ongoing meeting format, the households added a new line of merchandise for spouses to sell.

This dialogue illustrates how large vending units with members in different households, coalesce around particular decision processes. When routines can be established, vendors might include other household members directly in parts of the business they can routinize and so create more flexibility and more income-earning potential. The Sanchez business coordinated the efforts of many
people, at different addresses, selling very different types of goods. But everyone's efforts were oriented, habitually, in an ongoing way through the business meetings. In this distinct atmosphere those people involved can focus on the "business" part of their "family" life. But since in this case "everyone knows" that "business is one thing and family is another," no conflict that might divide the larger kin network is likely to grow beyond the business meeting.

B. Internal Constraints With Higher Degrees of Uncertainty

Coordination constraints can be much more complicated than those discussed thus far. Individuals run the risk that other household members or others working in the business may not be trustworthy. Paradoxically, vendors, like Ace above, who take the risk associated with selling some items upon themselves, can become a problem to their household as they cannot schedule activities for fear of missing business. So people's actions can cut them off from some relationships in favor of others. One way to deal with these "moral hazards" is to habituate the activity and/or monitor oneself and the activities of others.

1) Virgilee's business involves coordination constraints regarding the trustworthiness of people participating in the business. Virgilee's income was split between an unemployment check and vending. Prior to vending, she had been employed as a driver by a delivery service. An auto accident ended the high-paying job and she was relegated to low-paying and part-time phone answering work. She finally quit working for that firm and since then she spent her time attending to the vending business. She sold used work uniforms and had stable, periodic relations with her suppliers. She attended to all the merchandise access problems herself, and those were very few. However since the work clothes she sells occupy a large display area, she needed help guarding against thieves. Although she has a son, she had not been able to interest him in her clothing business. So instead of family labor, she hired wage labor or secured assistance from the occasional man in her life. She needed the help to watch over her extensive display, but neither is very reliable:
I was leaving Mike (old boyfriend) with my stuff so I could go out and shop or talk with other vendors. But he wasn’t giving me all my money, because he had that problem (Mike had a cocaine addiction and his condition deteriorated rapidly after being with Virgilee). I didn’t know he had that problem. Otherwise I would have never been with him. But then I had to forget having him work for me. That’s the only sad part.

Towards the last months of the Market she paid a young man $20.00 per day to help her manage her business. She had employed him for almost 10 months, but still did not have the confidence in him to manage the business by himself. As a result her vacations are spontaneous and unplanned and usually responses to family and personal tragedy:

Well I took two weeks this year, cause I went down to Mississippi. An aunt died. Her name was Virgilee. She’s the one that wanted me to open a store, she went down to Maxwell Street with me this summer, and she was so excited about it ... So she was gonna loan me the money, but the money that she left me, that’s what I used, about 3000 dollars, I invested it here, I thought this was my only chance. I know she wanted me to do it, and so this is for her, in her memory ... 

Virgilee did all the shopping for merchandise, as well as negotiating with clients. The labor she hired serves as a safeguard against thieves. She trusted Mike to hold money until Virgilee found out he was holding some back from her. Virgilee still does not trust her current employee to make sales. He is a buffer against high customer traffic. When she had an opportunity to trust a helper with more of the business, her trust was broken.

As described above, Ace’s business requires him to have almost unlimited "office" hours each day. In contrast to the elaborate organization of his assets, Ace’s life, his allocation of his non wage-labor time, is mostly contingent on the needs of his suppliers to dispose of merchandise. In effect, Ace acts as a fence, and in his case he is on call to service his suppliers. Beepers and a cellular phone help him keep in touch with suppliers and family. The problem is his suppliers have to move merchandise rapidly. In order to maintain that relationship, Ace had to respond when they call. Ace’s coordination
constraint is not with suppliers, rather it is with his family who cannot rely on him for the typical commitments a father makes: rides, recreation, etc. Ace did make commitments to his family and he did ignore his beeper or phone on occasion, but he realized this created a tension within him since he knows that ignoring a supplier might lead to the termination of a lucrative relationship.

Each of the businesses described must allocate labor taking into consideration a variety of constraints. Households engage in negotiations both to minimize conflict and allocate labor. Those that are able to divide responsibilities among family members face an occasional coordination crisis, but because they know each other’s information about household members, they are easily able to monitor their activities. They then allocate responsibility according to time constraints, child care needs, etc.

On the other hand, when there is insufficient labor in the household, vendors must either hire employees or deal with most or all of the business themselves. Either way, coordination problems are ongoing. In Virgilee’s case, she must spend time guarding her business against theft with the additional consequence that she has little personal time for herself or relationships she cherishes. Ace has the same problem but for a different reason. He must preserve business relationships at the cost of family time.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the organization of household-run street vending businesses. Uncertainty for vendors comes from two sources – outsiders (like the police) and insiders (including business employees and household members). Businesses closely organized those aspects of the business that present the most risk of interference by outsiders. And, when the risk is high, only one person engages in acquisition or sales rather than the entire household. Risk to the business also occurs internally. A spouse may discourage vending and make life uncomfortable. Or, household members may become very angry with an inequitable distribution of work. These risks are negotiated,
typically over time. If employees are used, vendors face other risks and their monitoring costs increase.

Theoretically this paper has developed the idea of "coordination constraints" based on the number and/or the differentiation of interactions to explain how habits are formed or changed in response to demographic changes in the household or to needs of the business setting, e.g., suppliers, protection against theft.

The analytic strategy is to ask: When in the practice of vending are habits formed or changed? What I have done is to show how people notice, challenge and change habits in the course of vending. I have also indicated the consequences of some of these changes and the new habits that result. So, instead of abstract categories with which to characterize de-contextualized vignettes, this strategy seeks to understand key concepts used by people in the course of practicing communicative processes of interest. With these, the analyst can begin to see how communicative processes overlap and co-determine each other, while at the same time acting as sources of people's "freedom" of action.
Notes

1. Thanks to Christine Horne for comments on a previous draft. Parts of this paper were presented at the 1993 Meetings of the American Sociological Association.

2. This casts doubt on the (in)formal distinctions which I noted in my introduction to this volume.

3. There is a growing literature in what is called the sociology of risk; Heimer, 1988 is an example. This literature will be the subject of other work I am producing using these data. A draft of that paper "Risky Business: How ‘sociology of ...’ Talk Organizes Both Analysts’ Perceptions of Cases and the Disciplines Themselves" is available for comment.

4. Resource dependence theory may be relevant to explain this behavior. Resource dependence theory argues that organizations are dependent on transactions with their surrounding environment and thus may be affected by external events (Oliver 1991, Stearns 1986, Scott 1982). Although at the Maxwell Street Market, vendors are not in typical exchange relationships with the police, they do require the tacit or explicit cooperation of state authority in order to operate.

   Generally, firms have two strategies through which to protect themselves – "buffering" and "bridging." Buffering strategies involve trying to avoid the unpredictable interference of outsiders (Scott 1981). Two behaviors that arguably fit into the buffering category are "decoupling" and "hiding" (Weick 1976). In the examples described above, both are used.

   First, vendors decouple by separating their activities from those of the rest of the household. Risks are absorbed by the individual. Therefore, if the individual is caught, the household is not jeopardized. In addition, because income from illegal activities often goes to the individual and not to household maintenance, the potential loss of income does not put household survival at risk.
Second, vendors hide their assets in an attempt to reduce the likelihood of outside interference. Vendors who understate their income for tax purposes, keep identifying labels off cassette tapes, and store stolen merchandise in many locations are all reducing their likelihood that their business will be affected by the police.

Resource dependence theory does not explain why households become involved in illegal activities in the first place. In fact, contrary to the assumptions of the theory, household autonomy is limited when vendors engage in illegal activities because they have to worry more about police interference. However, vendors’ concerns with being caught themselves and with protecting household members shows a concern with autonomy and protection from outside uncertainty that is consistent with predictions of resource dependence theory.

5. According to theories of moral hazard, individuals cannot be sure of the behavior of others with whom they interact (Ross 1973, Smith 1986). Exchange partners or agents are likely to act in their own self-interest. And if the principal has inadequate information, it will not know what the agent is doing (Smith 1986). In the example above, Virgilee hires an employee who she must monitor all the time. If other family members worked with her, or if a particular employee worked for her over a long period of time, her risks would decrease. But, because she cannot trust her current employee, she must pay the cost of monitoring his behavior and limiting his access to activities she cannot monitor well.
References


