

# **Too old for fun?**

## **Legitimising recreational drug use in adulthood.**

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# Background

- ESRC PhD at University of Manchester.
- Exploring the criminality and deviance associated with adult recreational drug taking.
- Otherwise conforming citizens who take drugs in their adult lives.
- **Today:** how drug takers perspectives can help inform policy.

# Methods

- **Criteria:** Age 30 +, taken drugs in the past year, not in treatment, do not fund drug taking through criminal activity.
- 26 interviews
- Age: 30-59
- 13 male, 13 female
- 12 parents
- Jobs: private, public and voluntary sector. 1 student, 1 retired.
- Discourse Analysis

# Legitimising drug use

- Six narrative frameworks (interpretative repertoires) which describe and legitimise recreational drug taking in adulthood.
- Not 'truth seeking' but representations of the self. Outline boundaries of acceptable drug taking behaviour.
- Each framework incorporates: drug taking preferences/behaviour; social context of use; and how drug use is maintained and controlled.

# **Reformed Hedonism: justifying drug use as past action**

- Past activity associated with hedonistic period of intense drug use. Dance music scene.
- Life turning points resulted in a change in lifestyles and priorities (career, parenthood, relationship).
- Legitimised as past activity. Progressed from this life stage. Now drug use is occasional.

# Clive, 54 Education

***Why don't you feel the need to do that anymore?***

*Just a different situation. I am not in club land anymore... And all my experiences are within and I don't necessarily need to re-ignite it because it is not my kind of thing. I know what it is like to be really, really off my head and all I have to do is squeeze my senses and it is back... That was the madness then and you know brilliant, but that was then man and I don't really feel the need now.'*

# **Planned celebration: justifying drug use as occasional pleasure**

- Periphery of drug taking environments and contexts.
- Autonomous decisions: only when individual feels they have sufficient opportunity and desire.
- Current use is restricted to special occasions: festivals, holidays, birthdays etc. Legitimised as low frequency and low priority.

# **Libby, 46 Music Technology**

*What drugs do you take and what part does it play in your life?*

*Something like those big occasions it has been whittled down to now, so New Year, August Bank holiday, possibly a birthday. If I do get a chance, you know when all the planets line up sort of thing. Everything has to be right to get to a club these days and that doesn't always happen.*

# **Drug Cultures: justifying drug use as linked to a leisure preference**

- Dedication to a social scene that is inextricably linked to drugs, i.e. dance music and stimulant/psychedelic drug use.
- Functional – keeps me going/dancing all night.
- Legitimised through subculture. Drug use has been consistent but never excessive.

## **Dina 39, Financial Advisor**

*'I really enjoy going out and because I have such a good time, I just can't see when I will stop. I will be the old timer of the crew, I might go out less when I am older but I will still do it I reckon.'*

# **Socialisation: justifying drug use as collective pursuit**

- Drugs enhance socialisation at an intimate level. Small groups/gatherings within the home or bars/pub.
- Shift from ecstasy to cocaine.
- Drug use influenced by others. Legitimised as only occurs in some social circles.

# Sara 47, Education

- *the part it plays in my life at any one time is quite dependant on who I am having it with and the circumstances around it. I suppose the key feature of it in contrast from what it used to be like is that it used to be a going out thing and now it is mostly at my house or at a friends, a more intimate 'one on one' or two or three or four people.*

# **Moderation: justifying regular drug use**

- Used by those who take drugs regularly. Needs to be defended as functional and controlled.
- Used by all those who smoke cannabis daily. And in some cases in conjunction with 'drug cultures' and 'socialisation' frameworks to further legitimise use.
- Legitimised by descriptions of frequency and amounts: within one occasion and balanced within life overall.

# Johnson, 33 Community worker

- *I come home from work, play with the kids and role a spliff when everyone has gone to bed and that is my time to reflect on the day... I graft and I make money, I go to work and I've still got my wits about me and I am not smoking in the day time. I am not wasting my life.*

# **Situational Opportunity: justifying lack of personal control**

- Drug use is situational – ‘victims of circumstance’
- Spend time in places where drugs are available and on offer.
- Lack personal control to refrain from drugs in these contexts. Express guilt and concern.
- Drug use is controlled by limiting time spent in these environments. Legitimised as they do not instigate.

# Albion, 38 Graphic Design

*And what situations would you take ecstasy in?*

*Festivals and sometimes socially at home with friends, but mainly clubs. I mean I am nearly 40 years old now, but given the right clubs and circumstances and people around me I would rarely say no. But I wouldn't say I actively seek it. If it finds me I will do it*

# 'Drugscrimination'

- 'Deviant' substance use -unacceptable and avoidable consumption.
- Related to: extreme intoxication associated with disregard for individual well-being and lack of respect for others.
- Technique of neutralisation – disassociate own use from this, which works to justify own use.
- Drugs (mostly) associated: ketamine, alcohol, cocaine, skunk (strong strain of cannabis).

# Terry, 54 Surveyor

- *The first thing we tried obviously was the ecstasy in the dance craze and it was fantastic but in a controlled environment with likeminded people . I can say I have never been drunk in public. I am not a drinker, I drink at home and get a bit tipsy but I have never been in a state of drunkenness in public it has never interested me.*

# Policy implications

- People want to change their psychosocial state.
- Easy access and availability of drugs despite their illegality.
- UK Drugs Policy incomplete – absent of any relevant policy about recreational drug use.
- Anti-drug message ineffective – need to move forward with harm reduction messages.
- Not about encouraging use, but responding to behaviour that can impact health and well-being