Symbolic Boundaries, Subcultural Capital and Prescription Drug Misuse across Nightlife Scenes

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Nightlife as Culture & the Place of Drug Use

- Nightlife scenes are key contexts for drug use among young adults.
- These nightlife scenes are diverse contexts with differing social norms, and often cohere with broader youth cultural forms.
- Youth cultures function differently and consequently establish varying patterns of drug use.
Practical Dimensions of Youth Cultures

- It is important to consider two key aspects of how youth cultures operate as different contexts.
- In the course of their participation, young people attempt to articulate boundaries of distinction.
- They also aim to cultivate status and position among their peers and within their scene more generally.
Symbolic Boundaries

- Groups create symbolic boundaries to mark position within the subcultural realm.
- These boundaries locate individuals within a particular contextual realm.
- They also provide the means for articulating those whom the group is unlike.
- Efforts to delineate symbolic boundaries are embedded in routine practices.
Subcultural Capital

- Young people negotiate and accumulate status within their own worlds.
- Possessing greater subcultural capital bestows status within that subcultural realm.
- Subcultural capital is forged in the routine practices of members.
Routine Practices

- The maintenance of symbolic boundaries and cultivation of subcultural capital occurs through routine practices within the subculture.

- These routine practices set the parameters for behavior and interaction within the subcultural context.

- In this manner, these broader dynamics create the context for drug use within a scene.
**Project**

- Designed to examine prescription drug misuse among socially active young adults.

- Focused on several youth cultures that thrive in urban settings, but influence young people more broadly.

- **Overall Goal:** Examining how contextual facets of young adults’ lives influence prescription drug misuse.
Project Design

- Phase I – One-year in-depth ethnography of six youth cultural nightlife scenes in New York.
- Phase II – An intercept survey of young adults in these scenes.
- Phase III – A longitudinal cohort study following 400 young adults over one year – qualitative interview and structured survey.
Enabling and Inhibiting

- Youth cultures – and the nightlife scenes that house them – are not just progenitors of drug and alcohol use.

- All youth cultures have components of them that both enable AND inhibit patterns of drug use.

- Symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital shape these patterns of enabling and inhibition.
Enablers in the Indie Rock Scene

- The “aesthetic of excess” is a key factor driving the use of a range of drugs in the indie rock scene.
- Cultural mythology of how behave “like a rock star” fuels the aesthetic of excess.
- It enables participants to become more intoxicated through Rx drugs and also leads to the use of Rx drugs to medicate hangovers.
Inhibitors in the Indie Rock Scene

- The use of Rx drugs is not always consistent with local notions of authenticity.
- In some circles, Rx drugs do not provide a means to publicly display excess.
- In other ways, Rx drugs may be perceived as “too safe” or “too mainstream.”
Enablers in the Hip-Hop Scene

- Drugs as currency for exchange within the scene enable the use of Rx drugs.
- Informal systems of exchange routinely occur and Rx drugs are easily tradable.
- They may highlight the transactional nature of drug use within the scene, conforming with other routines.
Inhibitors in the Hip-Hop Scene

- Rx drugs are inappropriate for patterns of conspicuous consumption.
- The use of Rx drugs cannot be rendered fully public in the way that drugs traditional to the scene are.
- The very invisibility that may make them valued in other scenes, renders them less germane to this context.
Enablers in the EDM Scene

- Use of Rx drugs to regulate the effects of “club drugs.”
- This might be to augment a high with stimulants or to come down from club drugs with sedatives.
- Rx drugs become incorporated into a wide pharmacopeia within the scene.
Inhibitors in the EDM Scene

- Rx drugs do not fit with historically sanctioned drugs within the scene.
- The scene’s emphasis on traditions may make the use of Rx drugs suspect.
- This aspect appears somewhat weaker in newer subscenes – e.g. dubstep – than more traditional scenes – e.g. house.
Conclusions

- Nightlife scenes, as public sites of youth cultures, remains key contexts for differentially shaping patterns of drug use among young people.

- Aspects of establishing difference and cultivating status play a key role in shaping drug use, even if not explicitly related to drugs themselves.

- Symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital play key roles both in harm reduction uptake and the prevention of harmful trends.
Thank You

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