

Response

Reasoning and restricted choices within recreational repertoires

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Introduction

Within one of the most illuminating longitudinal studies of drug use among young people in England, Williams and Parker (in press) provide further useful evidence that drug repertoires are broadening, that drug use decisions are becoming more sophisticated and that legal sanctions against illicit drugs have diminishing salience for young adults in Britain.

They chart part of a trajectory that the pundits—drug experts, academics, social and cultural commentators—can only begin to guess at over the time scales that are of most interest. For example, who in the year 1900 could have predicted phenomena, such as: the prohibition of opium and cocaine; the development and demise of the ‘British System’; the rise and fall of barbiturate use; the emergence of rave culture and widespread ecstasy use; the impact of HIV on drug use and the shape of drug services; and the recent resurgence in heroin and cocaine use? Nevertheless, Williams and Parker’s paper invites

some speculation about the direction of drug use in English society and the possible implications for a national strategy.

Cocaine transitions

The marked rise in cocaine use reported in the study by Williams and Parker reflects the increasingly globalised nature of drug use patterns, the repercussions of a saturated American market, and producers’ consequent decisions to market cocaine within Europe. This has combined with a relatively affluent and drug-experienced generation, within a culture that celebrates consumption to an extraordinary degree. As is evident, these conditions produce a society that is ready to adopt a drug that has a functionally brief and enjoyable stimulant effect, with a real price that is lower than ever, whilst still retaining some residue of the celebrity caché with which it has long been associated. The demonising of cocaine as a class A drug on a par with heroin is inconsistent with the expe-

rience of many members of this full-employment generation for whom the immediate experience is that of a drug, which is unproblematic to obtain or use alongside work and other activities. For the moment, a clear demarcation exists for this group between the use of cocaine powder from that of crack cocaine, which continues to be perceived as a problem drug of the urban poor and therefore largely avoided. This produces few impediments to cocaine powder's continued adoption. As with the pattern of North American cocaine use (Bachman et al., 1990), we should expect this to proceed until a combination of market saturation and a growing accumulation of visible British 'celebrity' cocaine casualties occur in the media and within people's immediate social networks. This is then likely to cause a plateauing in cocaine use within 5–10 years.

Consumption and the life course

Despite the observed upsurge of cocaine use and the persistence of alcohol for these 22 years olds, the overall trend for this group is likely to be one of a generally diminishing use of cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and alcohol across the life-course. Within this 'socially-included' group, recreational drug use will still have to compete with other leisure pursuits, the demands of work and a delayed family life. A fraction of this group seem likely to 'reinvent' their use of ecstasy in other cultural forms, such as that of the ecstasy users from the professions described by Rosenbaum et al. (1989). A still smaller fraction of their peers will 'discover' ecstasy, cocaine and other drugs in later life and occasionally incorporate it into a widening range of preferred intoxicants. A recent story of a 'middle aged ecstasy eater' (Guardian, 2001) nicely

illustrates this contribution to the erosion of the notion of illicit drug use as an exclusive feature of 'youth' lifestyles.

It is worth emphasising that just as it seems that illicit drug repertoires are being sustained for longer into adulthood, a complementary process, elongating drug careers, has been occurring at the beginning of adulthood. In a post-modern world young people are increasingly important as consumers, who are 'adultised' at an earlier and earlier age. Progressively earlier drug use has been a feature of this in the UK over the 10 years. Whilst welcome, the recently observed leveling in drug use among young people in Britain noted by the authors may yet prove to be a temporary blip. One interesting explanatory hypothesis for an observed reduction in smoking amongst British youth—and conceivably the use of other drugs—has been the absorption of spending on mobile phones and the capacity these have for signifying adult status as opposed to 'old technology' smoking (Charlton and Bates, 2001). Regardless, what we know of the role of early drug use as a predictor of later drug problems means that policies to delay drug experimentation remain a high priority within national drug strategies—though effective ways of achieving this are conspicuous by their absence.

Reason and choice

The notion of 'reasoned choice' used by the authors is useful and seems applicable—but only up to a point. The choices this generation is making are made from a rather restricted range of the enormous pharmacopoeia of intoxicants from which they could potentially be drawing: one to which the pharmaceutical industry will continue to add periodically, as with *Viagra*.

The historical position of alcohol and tobacco and the powerful industries promoting these drugs mean that these still predominate in a way that is not necessarily 'reasonable' in terms of health, hedonism or other functions of intoxication. Writing this as someone, who is in the midst of yet another tobacco smoking lapse reasoned choice seems an especially poor explanation for the widespread use of a highly addictive drug, with such well known chronic effects on health, by a third of the study sample.

As has already been noted, the current adoption of cocaine seems driven by macro-economic aspects of drug markets, as much as reasoned choice. Finally, among the wide range of possible phenethylamines that could be used, MDMA may well predominate, because of its cultural and historical embedding in rave and club culture—a form of 'lock-in' seen with other innovations, such as the inefficient QWERTY keyboard, or with the inferior VHS video format. Though ecstasy's use would, of course, be quickly discontinued if it was not a 'good enough' drug for its purpose.

These observations are not to deny that this sample are using a wider range of substances in a more deliberate and reasoned way, but merely to argue that reasoned choice has some obvious constraints as a sufficient explanation of the patterns of drug use that are observed.

Implications

As the authors amply demonstrate, this generation of young adults have experience of a range of substances, either personally or through their friendship networks, to an unprecedented degree. Interestingly, these are the next generation of parents and policy makers: over half of whom will have experience of one or more illicit drugs, mostly as

something benign, pleasurable, sometimes over-hyped or unremarkable and rarely problematic.

Although they will share the anxieties of each generation of parents before them, they will be less ready to give their children simple invocations to abstain from all drugs. They would not be quite so prone to the moral panic that has generally characterised the relationship between them and their own parents with regard to drugs. And they will be able to draw on personal knowledge and experience of drug use within a discourse in which they are concerned to reduce drug-related harm among their own children. They will consequently give a more ambivalent message about the morality of drug use and, to the extent that parental disapproval has any bearing on drug use, will consequently bring their children up in a more permitting environment. Albeit one in which parents are better equipped to contribute credible and practical health advice regarding drug use. In time, the United Kingdom's national strategy will have to accommodate a very different group of 'drug-using parents', who will be both more numerous and culturally discrepant from the stereotypical, impoverished, problematic drug user.

This forthcoming generation of parents will also be less tolerant of legislation that criminalized them or their friends—and continues to do so for that minority of the sample, who continue to use different drugs recreationally into later adult life. Nor will they be so tolerant of laws that criminalize their own children for what they have mostly come to perceive as relatively harmless youthful indiscretions occurring as part of their leisure lifestyle en route to adulthood. On the inter-generational time scale, drug law reform looks increasingly likely: with health and social consequences that cannot be fully

predicted. What is less certain is whether this will take the form of adjustments within the existing framework of international law or whether the UN declarations will themselves be amended to reflect these social changes.

For me, these findings particularly chime with my recent reading from the book '*Out of it*' of Walton (2001) and his heralding of a growing sophistication in the appreciation of the place of intoxication within society. Williams and Parker provide some evidence that this is indeed occurring within this generation—even among people, who have not had the benefit of reading Walton's book. Whether this particularly requires any special response within a national drugs strategy will only become evident as the experiment unfolds.

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