Research paper

The place and time of drugs

Cameron Duff *

National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology, Faculty of Health Sciences, 54-62 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, VIC 3065, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

'Context' is one of the most enduring analytical devices in social science accounts of alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, although its elaboration tends to emphasise macro-structural processes (like economic change, law enforcement, health policy, racism or stigma) at the expense of more finely-grained understandings of the *place and time* of consumption. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's notion of the assemblage, and its reception in recent critical geographies of AOD use, I will characterise context as an assemblage of social, affective and material forces. Such a characterisation is not indifferent to the range of structural forces that are often understood to mediate AOD use. Rather, it is concerned to document how these forces *actually participate* in the modulations of consumption. The assemblage will thus be construed in ways that align context with the 'real conditions' (place and time) of drug use. I will develop this argument by way of a case study drawn from a recent qualitative study of the social contexts of methamphetamine use in Melbourne. My goal is to document the ways 'context' is produced in the activity of drug use, and how 'context' so constructed, comes to modulate this use. By contrasting traditional approaches to the analysis of context with methods borrowed from Deleuze, I aim to transcend structural understandings of context in order to clarify the active, local and contingent role of contexts in the mediation of what bodies do 'on' and 'with' drugs.

© 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

"The minimum real unit is not the word, the idea, the concept, or the signifier, but the assemblage."

Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (51)

Gilles Deleuze's mature philosophy evokes an 'image of thought' contrary to the differentiation of human/nonhuman, agent/structure, subject/object, body/world and self/other that structures so much analysis in the social sciences. In their place, Deleuze proposes a logic of relations, multiplicities or *assemblages*. Assessing the adoption of this logic in the contemporary social sciences, Marcus and Saka (2006) argue that 'assemblage' has generally been mobilised to replace the more traditional notion of 'social structure'. In contrast to the putative rigidities of structure, and the reifications of social context, the assemblage emphasises processes of emergence, heterogeneity, instability and flux. Whereas structure is typically understood to be resistant to change, 'assemblage' foregrounds the ways "heterogeneous elements" are organised in the formation of social, symbolic, economic or political "scaffolding", which "orders" interaction, meaning and practice (Marcus & Saka, 2006:102). Such an approach suggests that the objects of social science inquiry (such as 'drug', 'consumer' or 'setting') shouldn't be regarded as static phenomena, but must instead be examined in the context of their contingent formation. "Assemblage thinking" is apparent in much recent innovation in the social sciences (see Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, & Swanton, 2012 for a review), availing a novel methodology of great promise for scholars interested in the use of alcohol and other drugs (AOD), and the problems associated with it (see Fitzgerald, 2009; Malins, 2004; Oksanen, 2013).

Expanding on this promise, the paper advances the figure of the assemblage as a means of rethinking context and its deployment in the analysis of AOD use. Throughout the paper, I will illustrate the heuristic merits of the assemblage by way of a discussion of the *place and time* of drugs. My purpose is to indicate how closer attention to the spatial and temporal aspects of AOD use may suggest novel means of transforming consumption events in order to reduce the harms that may be associated with them. Developing my critique of context, I will argue that the analysis of context in the study of AOD use tends to emphasise macro-structural aspects of social organisation at the expense of more finely-grained understandings of the place and time of consumption. Recent work in social and cultural geography would suggest that these spatial and temporal aspects emerge in an assemblage of bodies, settings, practices, affects and relations by which the event of AOD use unfolds alongside a discrete context (Wilton & Moreno, 2012:99–106). Contexts are in every instance made in the place and time of consumption. This formulation is not indifferent to the range of structural forces that are often understood to mediate AOD

* Tel.: +61 3 8413 8469.
E-mail addresses: cameron.duff@curtin.edu.au, cameron.duff@monash.edu

use. Rather, it is concerned to document how these forces *actually participate* in the modulations of AOD use in particular places, at particular times. I will develop these arguments by way of a case study drawn from a recent qualitative study of the social contexts of methamphetamine use in Melbourne. My goal is to document the ways context is produced in the activity of drug use, and how context so constructed, comes to modulate this use. By contrasting traditional approaches to the analysis of context with methods borrowed from Deleuze, I aim to transcend structural understandings of context in order to clarify the active, local and contingent role of contexts in the mediation of what bodies do 'on' and 'with' drugs. I will close with a discussion of the implications of this shift for contemporary drug policy debates.

Theorising the assemblage

The assemblage has two primary advantages over conventional understandings of the role of social contexts in mediating AOD use, including those informed by structuralism, neofunctionalism or constructivism (see Rhodes, 2009:194–98). First, 'assemblage' dissolves the antinomies of structure and agency in asserting a relational logic of emergence, association and ordering. Neither structure nor context can be regarded as coherent, distal or remote entities that somehow intervene in the activity of human agents. As such, the assemblage does away with the idea of 'structural factors' in the work of explaining power, mediation or inequality. It challenges in particular, the claim that behaviours like illicit drug use, and the problems associated with it, may be distinguished from their nominal social contexts. There is not, in this sense, behaviours and their contexts, but rather an assemblage of forces in the midst of their associations. Consistent with Michel Foucault's (1977) "micro-physics" of power, the assemblage makes power immanent to practice, rather than external to it in the operations of a distal structure. It follows that power is one force among many responsible for the assemblage's modulations. In privileging the analysis of force, 'assemblage' returns the social sciences to "thick empirical description" of the "practices, actors, atmospheres and representations that generate new interactions" in a social field (McFarlane, 2011:379). What matters is how entities affect one another in the creation of *relatively durable* social, political or economic formations, and how this process creates a context for interaction. Dependent on myriad forces, contexts are not fixed and they do not behave in the same way in all places at all times. This is the principal inference to be drawn from the application of 'assemblage thinking' to the analysis of context in social science inquiry. Assemblage thinking exposes the "conditions under which provisional unities emerge from the *agencement* (arranging, fixing, putting in order) of heterogeneous phenomena" (Anderson et al., 2012:176), thereby dismissing the epistemological disjunction of context from the activity of AOD use. 'Assemblage' emphasises the ways social and political formations (like 'context' or 'consumption') are made durable; the work that goes into maintaining these formations over time; and how they are transformed in routine struggles over power, meaning, resources or identity.

The second advantage to be derived from the mobilisation of 'assemblage' in the study of AOD use is the attention it calls to the activity of *nonhuman forces* in the modulations of consumption. Such attention further emphasises the importance of explaining the means of the assemblage's formation. Just as the displacement of 'structure' by way of the 'assemblage' should generate fresh insights into how social, political or economic forces mediate AOD use, renewed focus on the nonhuman aspects of AOD use should reveal more of the 'real conditions' of consumption. This will require greater attention to the range of spaces, entities, bodies, affects, forces and signs that *actually participate* in events of AOD use. While I will flesh this argument out below, the point for now is that the entities involved in assemblages of AOD use can each be identified by way of the effects they generate (and the concrete relations they establish) between bodies, human and nonhuman. For example, the work of distal actors, such as policy, law enforcement, income distribution, racism or stigma may be traced via the effects they engender in particular bodies, at particular times, in particular places. If they can't be traced, then such forces cannot be said to mediate (or participate in) AOD use. In advance of a novel "social science of harm reduction" (Rhodes, 2009:196), the properly empirical task is to document the technologies, bodies, affects and spaces involved in assemblages of AOD use, and the work each does to either promote or diminish harm. This suggests that harm should be regarded as a *property of the assemblage* and not of any one discrete body therein. However, before I may develop this argument it is important that I briefly clarify the formal properties of the assemblage.

As a theoretical object, 'assemblage' evokes diverse historical, conceptual and methodological antecedents, although it is arguable that much of the recent surge of interest in "assemblage thinking" across the social sciences may be traced to Deleuze's seminal contribution (see Anderson et al., 2012:176–77; DeLanda, 2006:3). Reflecting the variety of definitions and deployments of 'assemblage' in Deleuze's writing, both alone and in his collaborations with Felix Guattari, the adoption of the term in recent social science research betrays a remarkably heterodox trajectory (see Anderson and McFarlane, 2011:125–26). Given the aims of the present paper, the conceptual summary of the assemblage offered below will concentrate on its implications for thinking about place and place-making, and the relationship between activity, practice, space, force and affect as they may pertain to phenomena like AOD use. Certainly, a key facet of Deleuze's treatment of the assemblage concerns the links between territorialisation (or *place-making*), embodiment (or *subjectivation*) and affect (or *capacity*). Brief review of these links should shed light on the ways assemblage thinking may inform novel empirical analysis of AOD use (Malins, 2004).

Deleuze and Parnet (1987:69–70) characterise the assemblage in terms of a "multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them". As such, "the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. . .defined by its degree of power or 'freedom', its affects, its circulation of affects: what a set of bodies is capable of" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987:69–70). Caroline Williams (2010:249) provides a useful summary of the *relationality* that sustains all assemblages when she notes that the relation is "not simply. . .a link, connection or association between two or more discrete objects; relation is literally a 'taking in hand', a production of something that did not exist before and which, through the process of relation, *becomes an aspect of that thing's existence* (emphasis added)". Elements or phenomena are not folded into some pre-existent entity, in other words, but rather contribute their affective and relational force to the ongoing modification of the assemblage in the event of their encounter with it. It follows that all things may be defined by their relations, and by the various affects ('degrees of freedom') such relations enable. Elsewhere, Deleuze and Guattari (1987:40–45) emphasise the social, material, affective and semiotic aspects of the assemblage and its characteristic modes of production. With more specific relevance to the aims of this paper, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) assert that assemblages draw together discrete material resources in the deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of place. *All assemblages create a territory.* De/re/territorialisation involves a "double articulation" in which elements combine in "formed matters" subject to a variety of "relative movements" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 70–72).