Policy analysis

Governing through problems: The formulation of policy on amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) in Australia

Suzanne Fraser [a,b,*], David Moore [a]

[a] National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Melbourne Office, 54-62 Gertrude St, Fitzroy VIC 3065, Australia
[b] Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton VIC 3800, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Producing and implementing credible and effective policies on illicit drug use is generally seen as an important aspect of health governance in the West. Yet the controversy surrounding illicit drug use means this is no easy task. With public opinion perceived by policy makers to be set against illicit drug use, and understandings of its effects tending towards generalisation and pathologisation, the need for timely and rational responses is considered self evident. These responses are, however, regularly criticised as driven as much by electoral politics and expedience as by research findings or expert opinion. Destined to receive close critical scrutiny from all sides, these policies, and the processes undertaken to develop them, are obliged to negotiate a complex political domain. Despite this scrutiny, and the pressure it brings to bear on the policy-making process, little scholarly attention has been paid to the area to date. In this article, we examine in detail one important area of illicit drug policy – the use of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) in Australia. We draw on the international critical literature on the ATS problem to situate our analysis. We note that ideas of 'panic', including Cohen's notion of moral panic, have been used here to good effect, but, aiming to acknowledge the complexities of policy, we turn to poststructuralist methods of policy analysis to pursue a different approach. Following Bacchi's observation that 'we are governed through problematisations rather than policies' (2009, p. xi), we ask how the problem of ATS use has been formulated in policy. We examine key state and national policy documents, and two central themes found in them – causation and evidence – to identify the specific strategies used to authorise the recommendations and measures presented as following from the problem of ATS use. In doing so, we clarify important ways in which policy may at times work to obscure the limits of its legitimacy.

© 2011 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Producing and implementing credible and effective policies on illicit drug use is generally seen to be an important aspect of health governance in Western liberal democracies. Yet the controversy surrounding illicit drug use means this is no easy task. With public opinion perceived by policy makers to be set clearly and inflexibly against illicit drug use, and understandings of its effects and implications tending towards generalisation and pathologisation, the need for timely and rational responses is considered self evident. These responses are, however, regularly criticised by some stakeholders as being driven as much by strategic considerations relating to electoral politics, expedience and the symbolic role of policies as they are by research findings or expert opinion (see, for

example, Armstrong, 2007; Boyd & Carter, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2005; Jenkins, 1994; Ritter, 2009; Room, 2005). Destined to receive close critical scrutiny from all sides, these policies, and the processes undertaken to develop them, are obliged to negotiate a complex political terrain. They must address concern about drug use and demonstrate a preparedness to confront its problems. At the same time, they must also satisfy observers sometimes made cynical by past opportunistic responses and the generally high level of controversy that surrounds drug use. Despite this scrutiny, and the pressure it brings to bear on the policy-making process, little critical scholarly attention has been paid to the area to date (the work of Ritter, 2009 being a notable exception).

In this article we examine one important area of illicit drug use policy – that relating to the use of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) in Australia – to consider in detail the meanings produced in policy. We draw on the international critical literature on the ATS problem to situate our analysis. We note that ideas of 'panic', including Cohen's (2002 [1972]) notion of moral panic, have been used to good effect in this literature. However, aiming to acknowledge the complexities of policy and of the forces that

* Corresponding author at: Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton VIC 3800, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 9902 0322.
E-mail address: suzanne.fraser@monash.edu (S. Fraser).

Table 1
Policy documents analysed in this study.

Title	Author	Date
Inquiry into amphetamine and 'party drug' use in Victoria: Discussion paper	Parliament of Victoria, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee	2003
Inquiry into amphetamine and 'party drug' use in Victoria: Report	Parliament of Victoria, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee	2004
Inquiry into amphetamine and "party" drug use. DrugInfo Fact Sheet, Number 2.14 February	Hirsch, C.	2004
ANCD Methamphetamines position paper	Australian National Council on Drugs	2007
Victorian amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and related drugs strategy 2007–2010 Discussion paper	Mental Health & Drugs Division, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Victoria	2007
National amphetamine-type stimulant strategy 2008–2011	Developed on behalf of the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS) under the direction of a Project Management Group chaired by Ms Virginia Hart (Assistant Secretary, Drug Strategy Branch, Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing)	2008
Victorian amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS) and related drugs strategy 2009–2012	Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne, Victoria	2009

shape its processes and outputs, we turn to poststructuralist methods of policy analysis to pursue a different approach. Following Bacchi's (2009, p. xi) observation that 'we are governed through problematisations rather than through policies', we ask *how* the problem of ATS use has been formulated in policy. We identify two key areas for analysis: the ontological issue of causation and harm, and the epistemological issue of evidence, and examine key state and national policy documents to track problem formulation via these two issues (see Table 1 for a list of the documents analysed). In doing so, we illuminate the specific strategies used to authorise and attempt to render persuasive the recommendations and measures presented as following from the problem. As we do not have access to empirical data on the ways these documents are read and then operationalised in practice, we do not intend to make assumptions about or evaluate the extent to which these policy documents actually operate as effective tools of governance.

Background

The issue of ATS use has arisen and subsided several times in research and policy over the last few decades, with peaks in concern identifiable in the early 1990s and the early 2000s. Whether the concerns expressed have been warranted remains a contested issue. In 2001, Klee (2001, p. 22) wrote the following in the *Journal of Substance Use*:

The 1990s decade started with news of major developments world-wide in amphetamine use that are likely not only to have implications for the regions affected but also for the nature and style of illicit drug markets in the future...

Klee notes that 1995 saw the start of a series of international meetings aimed at assessing the scale and possible effects of these developments. In 1996, for example, the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) met in Vienna, finding that amphetamine use was indeed growing in scale and intensity. It reported that amphetamines were the second most popular illegal substances in the world after cannabis, and predicted further expansion in use. Production and trafficking were reported to be exceeding all measures of control.

Concern about ATS use, in particular the use of the form of methamphetamine known as 'crystal meth' or 'ice', also intensified in Australia in keeping with international debates. Along with the factors identified as driving problems internationally, however, factors unique to the Australian context, such as the emergence of what was dubbed a 'heroin drought', also contributed to concern that methamphetamine use was increasing, and that health

and criminal justice problems were growing too (Bush et al., 2004; Fulde & Wodak, 2007; McKetin, McLaren, & Kelly, 2005; Topp, Degenhardt, Kaye, & Darke, 2002). The extent to which these concerns were justified has been under debate since they first arose, even as policy in the area, driven by its own imperatives and according to its own temporal logic, has sought to 'catch up' with the problem. In 1994, Jenkins described an early manifestation of the issue as a 'panic'. His critique focused on the US and on media narratives that represented methamphetamine as a new drug (taken in the form of 'ice' or crystal meth), arguing that the panic was enabled by the existence of other hyperbolic drug-related discourse on crack cocaine. In both cases, he observed, media attention reframed whatever local problems did exist as matters of national significance and these then became the basis for government action (Jenkins, 1994, p. 27).

Much more recently, Armstrong (2007) documented the re-emergence of methamphetamine-related 'panic' in the US, noting its reliance upon an implicit claim that the drug and the issue were both new. Armstrong's paper refines the idea of panic used by Jenkins by drawing on moral panic theory originating in the work of Cohen (2002 [1972]). It argues that concern about methamphetamine use has been framed such that 'the official reaction to the social condition is out of all proportion to the alleged threat' (Armstrong, 2007, p. 427). Furthermore, Armstrong asserts that the moral panic is aimed explicitly at rural, white, poor people whose economic security has been eroded by global changes in agribusiness, leaving them vulnerable and insufficiently resourced. According to Armstrong, the methamphetamine panic allows us to view the rural poor as criminal, thereby preempting or circumventing our responsibility to resolve the structural problems they face.

Following Jenkins and Armstrong, Boyd and Carter (2010) examine the treatment of methamphetamine use in Canadian and US newspapers and other media. They (2010, p. 233) speculate that:

The panicked discourse evident in these news stories suggests that these "crises" may reflect what David Garland (2008) called an effort to turn methamphetamine use into a "cultural scapegoat" (p. 15) for social anxieties about youth culture, homelessness, and the perceived erosion of racial hierarchies.

The authors also argue that, in addition to providing insights into methamphetamine use and its representation per se, analyses of the kind offered in their paper also provide broader insights into the operations of government (Boyd & Carter, 2010, p. 233):

[Our] analysis [. . .] also allows us to understand more fully how formal and informal modes of regulation evolve and become institutionalised in legal codes and policy frameworks.