

Volatile bodies: Stories of corporeal pleasure and damage in marginalised young people's drug use

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Abstract

Background: This paper explores the connection between meaning and corporeal pleasure in drug use experience through considering accounts of inhalant use made by marginalised young people in Melbourne, Australia. Inhalants (also known as volatile substances or solvents) have a reputation internationally as drugs of desperation rather than enjoyment. Corporeal pleasure as a motive for inhalant use is generally overlooked in policy, drug research literature and health education—as is frequently the case also in relation to other forms of drug use practiced by marginalised peoples. In contrast, harms such as brain damage and death are strongly emphasised.

Methods: Twenty-seven young people with current or past experience of inhalant use were interviewed, each between one and three times. Participants were asked to speak about what they liked and did not like about inhalant use. A narrative analysis was used to identify stories about the bodily encounter with inhalants that were iterated across interview transcripts.

Results: Two narratives about corporeal experiences of inhalant-induced intoxication are discussed here, both of which research participants framed within an understanding of these drugs as pre-eminently dangerous. The first narrative is that inhalant use is an ineffable experience of the body. The second links the intensity of pleasure occasioned by inhalant use with the infliction of brain damage and risk of death.

Conclusion: Catastrophic beliefs about the dangers associated with inhalant use serve in some instances to accentuate the pleasures it affords users, and at the same time debilitate their sense of capacity to change. Additionally, where drug users are depicted as self-harming rather than seekers of (albeit risky) pleasure, the range of policy options likely to be implemented is restricted. Education provided through drug treatment presents an opportunity to counter some of the harms associated with narratives of pleasure and damage in drug use.

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Introduction

Inhalant use (also known as volatile substance or solvent use) consists of breathing in or sniffing industrial and household products – including petrol (gasoline), aerosol sprays, butane and propane fuels and some glues – to achieve intoxication. Substances used as inhalants contain a range of chemicals with differing pharmacological effects (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2005). Inhalant use is most prevalent among young people living in socio-economically marginalised communities (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2005; World Health Organization, 1999). Perhaps because regular use of inhalants is strongly asso-

ciated with being young, Indigenous or poor, inhalants are generally seen as drugs of desperation rather than pleasure. Indeed their use is exceptionally stigmatised and stigmatising (d'Abbs & Brady, 2004; Oetting, Edwards, & Beauvais, 1988).

This paper considers how pleasurable sensation is intertwined with meaning in drug use. It does so through analysing stories told by young people in Melbourne, Australia of sensations accompanying the initial phase of inhalant-use-induced intoxication (states they refer to as 'rushing', 'buzzing', or 'feeling high'). Two narratives compiled from interviews with young users and ex-users of inhalants are the focus of this paper. The first narrative is that inhalant use is an indescribable and often profoundly pleasurable experience of the body. Perhaps surprisingly, some young people interviewed made favourable comparisons about the effects

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of inhalants over other drugs. The second narrative links the physical pleasure occasioned by inhalant use with the infliction of damage to the body and brain. A conclusion considers some of the challenges for drug users and for policy presented by the co-existence of these two narratives in the context of wider social disregard for pleasure as a motive for inhalant use.

Many people would find implausible – perhaps even perturbing – the notion that inhaling a product such as spray paint can be pleasurable. Far more generally it has been argued that Western cultures are uncomfortable with representations of pleasure, not just in relation to socially proscribed forms of drug use (Barthes, 1973). No matter how socially codified, pleasure is seen as transgressive and ungovernable (Coveney & Bunton, 2003). Reluctance to deal with the body and affective experience such as pleasure is evident also in traditional sociology (Shilling, 1999) and the drug use literature. Because sensations inevitably elide expression in written and spoken language, the generation of meaning through embodied encounters with substances has been neglected in favour of exploring representations of drug use (Weinberg, 2002). Where the physicality of drug use is considered, academic work is very often preoccupied with damage caused to bodies, rather than how people apprehend the sensations that drugs afford them. This dynamic is evident not only in research but also in drug policies that attempt to restrict supply but less frequently acknowledge that people enjoy using psychoactive substances (Duff, 2004). That said, the now established interest in social theory on the body as the principle site where subjectivity is constructed has prompted a burgeoning concern among drug researchers to represent and interpret embodied sensations – such as pleasure – that accompany substance use (i.e. Brain, 2001; Denscombe, 2001; Fitzgerald, Louie, Rosenthal, & Crofts, 2000; Malbon, 1999).

While some recent drug research has paid detailed attention to the significance of pleasure, the pleasures of drug use practiced by extremely marginalised people (such as inhalant use) are rarely given similar focus. Marginalised young people's drug use is frequently characterised in sociological research as a means of dealing with or escaping from intolerable life circumstances, rather than also pleasurable in itself (see for example, Blackman, 1997; MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998).¹ It is unremarkable that government reports and inquiries both in Australia and elsewhere deal cursorily if at all with pleasure as a motivation for inhalant use, given this is rarely a focus of such writing (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 1995; National Inhalant Abuse Taskforce, 2006; Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, 2006; Skellington Orr & Shewan, 2006). A similar disavowal of pleasure as a motive for marginalised people's drug use

may, however, also be observed in the inhalant use literature. Much of the research on inhalants only briefly lists psychoactive effects, such as euphoria, hallucinations and grandiosity, adding that people use inhalants principally because they are legal, cheap and easy to access (see for example, Flanagan & Ives, 1994; Kurtzman, Otsuka, & Wahl, 2001; Shah, Vankar, & Upadhyaya, 1999).

To argue that accounting for embodiment is central to understanding all forms of drug use is not to imply that affective experiences such as corporeal pleasure can ever be disconnected from meaning. Phenomenologists have argued that meaning arises from embodied experience in a socially mediated world. Melucci (1996, p. 25) links embodiment and meaning nicely when he writes:

We always move within a shared domain of language. Whenever we name a feeling, whenever we utter a need, we establish a bridge between the deep, subjective primary experience, on the one hand, and the network of social relations to which we belong and from which we draw the words to describe our experiences, on the other.

The bodily encounter with a psychoactive substance may be understood, therefore, as both profoundly social (encoded and enmeshed in dynamic discourses or fields of meaning) and simultaneously physiological. While drugs have effects on bodies that may be measured (and are certainly experienced as 'real'), people apprehend and make sense of their drug use by interpreting it (not necessarily consciously) through wider discursive frames. Weinberg (2002, p. 15) proposes that the meanings evoked by effects of drugs evolve through embodied engagement in the social world: 'this approach suggests that the meaning of drugs and the emotional effects drugs have on us derive to a significant extent from the ways in which we have come to use those drugs in the various social contexts that make up our lives'. Thus the environments in which drugs are used (for instance, homelessness) are influential in whether people experience associated sensations as pleasurable.

Drugs are powerful signifiers of meaning, not just for individuals who use them but also across cultures (Room, 2005; Sulkunen, 2002). Drug use may signal either inclusion or marginality. Particularly use of drugs that is perceived as uncontrolled or excessively dangerous becomes itself a marker of individual failure in self-management (Lalander, 2003). As Coveney and Bunton (2003, p. 169) argue, people who seek bodily pleasure through practices regarded as harmful become objects of fear and revulsion: the 'volatile body, which refuses to be disciplined, is highly disordered, dangerous and polluting'.

One mechanism available to societies for dealing with the disturbing 'volatile' body is to deny the legitimacy of its pleasure. For O'Malley and Valverde (2004), contemporary forms of governance are predicated on an understanding of individual freedom as the capacity to make rational choices that will maximise one's own personal pleasure. This means

¹ More recent research by Parker et al. develops a focus on the importance of embodied pleasure. See for example, Measham, Aldridge, and Parker (2000).

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