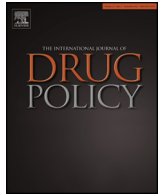




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Risky pleasures and drugged assemblages: Young people's consumption practices of AOD in Madrid

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ABSTRACT

Background: Drawing on a research project that we carried out on the functionality of “excessive” consumption practices in the lifestyles of young people in Madrid, this article aims to understand how (dis)pleasurable states emerge during young people's consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

Methods: This article claims that these states derive from “drugged assemblages,” that is, a set of (human and non-human) actants that intra-act to produce different effects. Although pleasure can be one of these effects, it is not always guaranteed: consumption practices are assemblages that fluctuate between pleasure and displeasure, and the former can be reached or not depending on the characteristics acquired by the assemblage. It is this fluctuation that makes pleasures “risky.” Drugged assemblages also configure and are configured by specific spatial-temporal and material apparatuses or dispositifs. We will analyse botellones, night-clubs and raves as examples of this kind of dispositif, focusing on how they work as a holistic frame where drugged assemblages emerge.

Results: Finally, we will focus on the different strategies and practices that young people, in constant intra-action with other agencies, develop in order to achieve and keep a “controlled loss of control” within the limits and potentials offered by these contexts, in a constant effort to avoid the risks that may result from the blurred line that divides pleasure and displeasure.

Conclusion: In this sense, we will argue that, despite the criticisms it has received, it is possible to make Measham's concept of “controlled loss of control” compatible with a post-humanist theoretical framework.

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Introduction

Social value placed on drugs stem from two different, almost dissenting, sorts of discourse. The first one, markedly catastrophic, associates drugs with physical or moral dangers and derives from medical studies and debates. The media usually echoes this stance, entrenched as it is in moral (panic) narratives that refer to “social permissiveness” to advocate for prohibitionist or surveillance policies. On the other hand, other discourses have also spread, especially among social work associations and consumer groups. In these discourses, pleasure is considered as the legitimizing element of consumption, which is reassessed as “recreational use”. The AOD user is also regarded as a rational and autonomous subject that sidesteps the risks inherent in consumption due to a “well-informed choice”. Likewise, from this view healthcare

institutions should provide information (on-site analysis of substances, for instance) so that consumers could make a rational decision about what they consume and how to consume it in order to *enjoy controlling*. Both discourses, however, share an analogous way of conceptualizing “pleasures” and/or “dangers” as fixed effects of discrete entities: substances (drugs) that produce (pre) determined effects, or individuals (consumers) that do or do not have enough information, and that are (or are not) able to decide and control what to consume and how to do it.

In this article, however, we will claim that the boundaries between “pleasure” and “danger” are neither fixed nor consistent, and nor are the subjects and objects from which such notions emerge. Drawing from theoretical stances such as the Actor-Network Theory, Barad's “agential realism” (2007) and Deleuze and Guattari's assemblages (1987), we will aim to understand consumption practices as assemblages of different elements from which the subjectivity of the body (either individual or collective) emerges. Such emergence is produced from a flow of different enactments that oscillate between pleasure and displeasure, and hence its “risky” condition. Therefore, pleasures that arise from

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states of bodily intoxication are also fragile and precarious. “Excessive” consumption, according to young people from our ethnography, relates to the imbalance in which pleasures promised (and indeed offered) by consumption may turn into displeasures depending on the context and on a variable combination of several factors.

Likewise, we will also state that most common time-spaces for AOD consumption by young people from Madrid, that is, *botellones*,¹ nightclubs and raves, are configured as specific material and socio-spatial apparatuses that enhance, but also limit, certain sorts of actants assemblages. We will define the latter as “drugged assemblages”, relying on Bøhling’s term “alcoholic assemblages” (Bøhling, 2015). We aim to understand, through these assemblages, how subjects (both individual and collective) emerge in drug use practices, considering the latter as management practices of “risky pleasures”. To fully understand “risky pleasures”, hence, an approach to the subjective bodily states (Poulsen, 2015: 15) that arise from drugged assemblages is needed.

The unstable condition of pleasurable states that derive from AOD consumption leads young people to perform control practices to avoid undesirable and unpleasant states. On the one hand, in “drugged assemblages” the humanist notion of “control”, related to an autonomous and rational subject, is inadequate because it does not consider how the intra-action of different actants leads to unexpected effects that overflow the limits of individual autonomy. On the other hand, young people from our ethnography have repeatedly expressed, both in the interviews and in the observations, their desire to “control” consumption: “if you have never eaten a kind of drug, dude you don’t know what’s going to happen to you. You shouldn’t eat eight pills if you don’t know what they are [made of], because it is likely that your body doesn’t tolerate them” (Paula, 19 years). We will claim that a properly reformulated notion of “controlled loss of control” (Measham, 2002, 2004) may be compatible with the assemblage framework to which this article is ascribed.

In the following section, we will present the methodology through which we conducted fieldwork with young AOD users from Madrid. Data and results derived from that fieldwork will be used as empirical material in the subsequent findings sections. In the third section, we will show the relationship between what we will call “drugged assemblages” and their production apparatuses, that is, a set of socio-material articulations deployed in characteristic space-times such as *botellones*, clubs or raves. In the fourth section, we will focus on how AOD consumption is related to pleasant states that are, however, fragile and volatile. We will state that the limits between pleasure and displeasure are extremely porous, starting with the development of the concept of “risky pleasures”. In this context, we will discuss, in the following section, the way in which AOD consumers’ agency, related to a “controlled loss of control” (Measham, 2002, 2004), is not an autonomous, discrete and consistent entity. On the contrary, some of the consumption-management practices, in the context of the drugged assemblages, are oriented to the sustainability of a sort of “pleasure flows” by means of a controlled loss of (shared) control. Finally, in the last section we will present some reflections on the implications of our analysis for the development of public policies.

Methodology

The data analyzed in this article derive from a research project that sought to understand, from an ethnographic stance, the functionality of “excessive” consumption of alcohol and other

drugs in the lifestyles of young people from Madrid. For that purpose, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by a research team of five anthropologists (including the authors of this text) during six months in different night-time environments from Madrid. The data generation process unfolded in two overall stages.

First, we conducted a total of twenty-four sessions of participant observation, from December 2015 to April 2016. During these observations, in places such as *botellones*, raves and (massive) night clubs, we took the “outing”, that is, the period from the meeting of the group of young people to its dissolution, as the time unit. Although this time span usually consisted in what is known as “night out”, some outings extended beyond dawn, while others only took place during the afternoon. The observation plan was designed according to the snowball sampling: some young people that we met during the outings took us to others, depending on both the ease of access to the field and the requirements of the research. The latter involved two factors: first, to ensure that the variables of age and gender could have some analytical relevance, which required observations with both mixed and gender-differentiated groups; and second, to participate in outings with groups of different ages. For that matter, we defined two age ranges: 16–19 and 20–24 years, although the last group is more represented due to the frequency and the variation of outings that they carried out.

In the second phase, during April and May 2016 we conducted twelve in-depth interviews with key informants, that is, young people that we had encountered during field observations whose discourses appeared to be particularly relevant to us, either due to their richness of nuances or because of their outstanding experiences. For example, most of them were frequent (even daily) AOD users, and were used to going out every week in different environments. Interviews were conducted apart from the spaces and times of participant observations, in places familiar to the interviewees (coffee shops, calm locations in their neighbourhoods, and even in their own houses). A total of 7 men and 5 women were interviewed, between the ages of 16 and 27. Those under 18 were studying at high school, while those over 18 attended university or worked in the service sector. The interview script was sketched during the period of participant observations, and was modified according to our findings in order to adapt it to our new hypotheses. Final topics of the interview were related to the notions of youth and being-young, the ways in which interviewees organized and perceived ordinary and leisure times, their practices and spaces of consumption, and their (inter) relation with “excessive” consumption of AOD.

The results of this investigation have been recently published in the book *Sudar material. Cuerpos, afectos, juventud y drogas*² (Cañedo, Alonso, Castillo, Fernández, & Moral, 2017). Fragments of field data referred in this article, thus, stem both from the interviews and the notes and diaries resulted from the observations.

Material and socio-spatial apparatuses of production of drugged assemblages

Bøhling considers the state of alcohol intoxication as a “continuous mode of corporeal, affective and subjective expansion and contraction which, in relation to particular assemblages, (continually) increases and/or decreases the drunken subject’s capacity to act in, feel and affect its surroundings” (2015: 133).

¹ A *botellón* is a Spanish sort of venue in which groups of young people gather in the street with the purpose of consuming alcohol.

² “Sweating material. Bodies, affections, youth and drugs”: http://adolescenciay-juventud.org/que-hacemos/monografias-y-estudios/ampliar.php?Id_contenido/126756/tipo/all/ (Accessed 10 April 2017).

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