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Desiring assemblages: A case for desire over pleasure in critical drug studies

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ABSTRACT

While critical drug researchers have long pushed for an acknowledgement of pleasure in discourses of drug use, few have explored the alternative possibilities offered by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire. In this paper I map out some of the conceptual differences between pleasure and desire and explore the opportunities opened up by attending more closely to desire in critical drug studies. I suggest that while discourses of pleasure do make an important intervention into and against dominant narratives of risk, harm, and addiction, they may inadvertently be working to keep in place the very binaries and forms of neoliberal western subjectivity that support those narratives. I argue that a Deleuzo–Guattarian ontology of desire is a better tool with which to make sense of the complex relations that form between drugs and bodies, challenge medical and criminal responses to drug use, and bring forth assemblages that enhance, rather than diminish, bodily capacities.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Richard Klein explored – in poetic detail – the many joys of smoking, showing how acknowledgement of these joys was necessary in order to fully understand and deal with the grief associated with quitting (Klein, 1993). Still one of my favourite cultural texts on drug use, Klein's *Cigarettes are Sublime*, is certainly about pleasure, and the importance of incorporating an appreciation of pleasure into any serious attempts at public health or harm reduction. But what it also shows is that the joys of smoking involve something bigger, or deeper, than pleasure: experiences that cannot be fully encapsulated by that concept. The aesthetic beauty of smoke curling upwards; the new relations forged with the lungs and breath; the shifting sensations of the body and its postures; the thrill of altered temporalities, spatialities and social connections; the visceral intensity of life and death so acutely inter-twined. One may indeed feel a certain pleasure associated with these things, but they also enact a range of corporealities that have little to do with pleasure. What Klein does then, is render palpable not just the *pleasures* of smoking, but the complex *desiring-assemblages* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, 1987) that they bring into being, and which we will need to make sense of if we are to think seriously about harm reduction.

Critical drug researchers have long pushed for an acknowledgement of pleasure in discourses of drug use (see for example: Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Duff, 2008; Holt & Treloar, 2008; Moore, 2008; Race, 2008; Valentine & Fraser, 2008). Many others have noted the value of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage for making sense of the spatiality and sociality of drug use events (see for example: Bøhling, 2014; Duff, 2014, 2007; Fraser, 2006; Malins, 2004a; Malins, Fitzgerald, & Threadgold, 2006). Far less attention, however, has been paid to the possibilities opened up by Deleuze's related concept of desire (for exceptions see: Fitzgerald, 1998, 2007, 2010; Leahy & Malins, 2015; Malins, 2004b, 2011). This is somewhat surprising given the close connection that exists between pleasure and desire, and given that assemblages are, for Deleuze and Guattari, first and foremost 'desiring machines': networks of bodies (people, things, discourses) that operate to machine (join, cut, channel, free, block) flows of desire. It is also surprising given the frustratingly little impact that attempts to include pleasure in harm reduction have made outside the academic realm. Despite enriching understandings of drug use, and posing an undeniable challenge to dominant accounts of addiction, acknowledgement of drug-related pleasures continues to be avoided and feared by policy makers, and has had little lasting influence on drug policy, education or practices of harm reduction.

In this paper, therefore, I bring Deleuze and Guattari's unique conception of desire into focus, showing first how it connects to and differs from pleasure, and then exploring its potentials for

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critical drug studies and harm reduction. I argue that a Deleuzo–Guattarian ontology of desire offers a more useful tool than pleasure for making sense of the complex relations that form between drugs and bodies, and accounting for the diversity of drug use experiences, practices and motivations. I also suggest that it may have a wider strategic and political value. For while attending to pleasure does make an important intervention into and against pathologising narratives of addiction, it does little to challenge discourses of criminality, and may be inadvertently working to keep in place the very binaries and neoliberal western subjectivities that underpin both these dominant approaches. By bringing desire to the fore – in a way that repositions rather than erases pleasure – I suggest we have a greater chance at challenging both medical and criminal justice responses to drug use, enriching understandings of harm reduction, and enacting assemblages that enhance, rather than diminish, bodily capacities.

Pleasure in critical drug studies

The absence of pleasure in dominant accounts of drug use has been a longstanding frustration for critical drug researchers (Holt & Treloar, 2008). While drug-related pleasures feature abundantly in art and popular culture, they have been sorely neglected in more official accounts of drugs. This neglect has not only been apparent in drug policy and education, where any mention of pleasure seems to be positioned as a danger to the goals of deterrence and prevention, but also in sociological drug research, where the risk-attuned disciplinary lenses of public health and criminology, along with risk-averse government funding priorities, have led to a dearth of engagements with pleasure (Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Moore, 2008). Even in practices and discourses of harm reduction, where drug-related pleasures are certainly not judged or feared, pleasure nonetheless tends to be eschewed in favour of a more neutral, evidence-based, rational pragmatism (Holt & Treloar, 2008). There is in harm reduction, as the name itself makes clear, a decisive focus on reducing risk and harm rather than, for example, maximising pleasure or joy.

As critical drug researchers have shown, the neglect of pleasure in these realms not only reduces the richness of our understandings and engagements, it is also likely to be increasing experiences of drug-related harm (Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Holt & Treloar, 2008; Race, 2008). For when everyday embodied experiences of drugs (as positive, pleasurable, life-affirming) fail to resonate in official discourses about them (as harmful, dangerous, unhealthy), stigma and shame are likely to increase while trust in practical, health-affirming drug messages and services is sure to diminish. Acknowledgement of pleasure, then, is crucial to understanding and adequately responding to issues related to drug use. But what kind of pleasure are we talking about? And does the concept of pleasure go far enough in terms of thinking through that which is missing from dominant understandings of drug use?

Eschewing bio-psychological and neuro-physiological renditions of drug-related pleasure – which bind it to internal mental states, universal biological drives and the chemical actions of substances – critical drug researchers have shown how drug pleasures need to be understood as dynamic, relational, contextual and embodied (Duff, 2008; Keane, 2008; Race, 2008; Valentine & Fraser, 2008). The pleasures associated with drugs are historically and culturally mediated: tied to the specific socio-spatial and spatio-temporal discourses and relations. They can be libidinal, chaotic and sensual (what Bunton & Coveney, 2011 refer to as 'carnal' pleasure), but they can also emerge through practices of moderation ('disciplined pleasure'), denial ('ascetic pleasure'), and collective spirituality ('ecstatic pleasure') (Bunton & Coveney, 2011). Drug pleasures are not simply that which we seek or receive, but are performative enactments involving both discourse and material practice. As Race (2008) so cogently argues, the work of Foucault is particularly useful in mapping these collective practices and enactments of drug-related pleasure, particularly as Foucault enables us to see in the concept of pleasure an immanent potential for developing an ethical relation with oneself and the world.

But what are the limitations of these concepts of pleasure? And how well do they shape up when used within a more post-humanist ontological frame, such as that offered by Deleuze and Guattari, which is increasingly being mobilised to make sense of the complex relations between bodies and drugs?

Desire vs. pleasure

Despite having great affinity with the work of Foucault, Deleuze (1997, 2001) was notoriously critical of his reliance on the concept of pleasure, and is known for having disagreed publically with him on its philosophical utility. Where Foucault (1986, 1990) positions pleasure, its uses and moderations, as one of the key sites for an ethics of living, Deleuze can "hardly bear the word pleasure" (Deleuze, 1997, np) for it represents to him a limited and constrained mode of desiring, something that stifles, rather than opens up the more primal desiring processes that facilitate an ethics of transformation, connection and vitality. "I cannot give any positive value to pleasure," he writes, "because pleasure seems to me to interrupt the immanent process of desire; pleasure seems to me to be on the side of strata and organisation" (Deleuze, 1997, np).

In some ways this disagreement is surprising, as Foucault's concept of pleasure and Deleuze's desire have many similarities. Both are attempts to articulate a materiality of the body and its joys unencumbered by dominant medical and psychoanalytic frames. Where Foucault chooses pleasure as the best concept though which to define "a more dynamic and affirmative perspective on the social pragmatics of bodies" (Race, 2008, p. 418), Deleuze goes with desire, albeit a thoroughly reformulated version. Where Foucault feels that desire is already too bound up with the subjectifying discourses of sex and sexuality to be of any real use (Race, 2008, p. 418), Deleuze feels that pleasure is too limiting a concept through which to map the complexities of bodily engagements, transformations and power relations. But while the two philosophers clearly had analogous aims and motivations, and the concepts they articulate do have some ontological connections, they do nonetheless differ. It is worth exploring, then, what Deleuze means by desire, and what this reformulation might offer critical drug studies that the concept of pleasure cannot.

Unlike the prevailing psychoanalytic models of desire, which tend to permeate everyday usage, the desire Deleuze refers to – and which is mapped out most clearly in his collaborative writings with Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, 1987) – is not that which a pre-existing subject has for something, nor is it motivated by individual lack or the pursuit of pleasure. It is instead best understood as a pre-subjective, pre-conscious life force or energy that flows between bodies, connecting, animating and transforming them, enabling the ongoing differentiation essential to life itself. In place of the autonomous agentic subject and its verb: 'I desire', we thus have a field of pre-personal currents: a kind of primordial soup or "plane of immanence" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) from which bodies and subjects emerge, and through which they become-other. Desire, Deleuze writes,

> is but one with an assemblage of heterogenous elements . . . it is process, in contrast with structure or genesis; it is affect, as opposed to feeling; it is "haecceity" (individuality of a day, a season, a life) as opposed to subjectivity; it is event, as opposed to thing or person. And above all it implies the constitution of a

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