International Journal of Drug Policy xxx (2017) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo

Review

Thinking with pleasure: Experimenting with drugs and drug research

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 May 2017
Received in revised form 9 July 2017
Accepted 23 July 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Pleasure
Foucault
Problematization
Experiments
Science and Technology Studies
Queer theory

ABSTRACT

Within the field of drug and alcohol studies, researchers think *about* pleasure or *against* it; we analyse, consider, investigate, invoke or ignore it. The philosophically inclined may think *of* pleasure or write *on* it, but in each of these scenarios pleasure is kept at an arm's length while the researcher appears to remain unmoved – detached observers, objective scientists, conceptual experts, program directors, sharp critics, policy advocates – sober judges whose sovereignty is secured by the formal conventions of positivist research, established theory, institutional authority and/or disciplinary knowledge. This paper asks what happens when pleasure is allowed to emerge as a constitutive element in the *relations* of drug and alcohol research. What happens when we conceive our work as thinking *with* pleasure, rather than simply researching pleasure or thinking *about* it? I return to the later work of Foucault, reading it alongside conceptions of the experiment drawn from Science and Technology Studies, arguing that both the pleasures of drug consumption and drug research might be conceived more generatively as mutually implicated in events.

Introduction

In recent discourses of harm reduction, calls to acknowledge the pleasures associated with alcohol and other drug consumption now abound. Typically these calls make some appeal to liberal humanist sympathies: Investigation of the subjective dimensions of drug use is supposed to produce more balanced analyses and a more comprehensive understanding of complex stigmatized behaviours with a view to promoting the fairer treatment of drug consumers (Holt & Treloar, 2008; O'Malley & Mugford, 1991). Other arguments for pleasure are informed by pragmatist principles: If, as Becker (1953) has shown, people learn how to use drugs in processes of social interaction, then engaging with the social pragmatics of pleasure might clue researchers into the techniques drug consumers have devised to look after themselves and their peers and reduce unwanted harms (Race, 2008, 2009) or direct much-needed attention to the mediating contexts of drug consumption (Duff 2008; Farrugia, 2015). Poststructuralist work approaches pleasure from yet another angle, exploring the constitutive effects of pleasure within discursive, classificatory and medical regimes (Keane, 2002; Race, 2009). Some studies conducted along these lines develop fascinating analyses of the technical arrangements and forms of practical labour that health service providers and others adopt to stabilize drug effects and discipline users in contexts where pleasure generally functions to constitute the drug in question and its consumption as illicit (Fraser & valentine, 2008; Keane, 2008).

The neglect of pleasure within drug policy discourse has been variously explained, puzzled over and theorized. Moore (2008) attributes its absence to the governmental preoccupation with risk, pathology and prevention, while O'Malley and Valverde (2004) discuss how the prioritization of the rational-choice actor within neoliberal regimes makes any official acknowledgement of the pleasures some people associate with drug consumption tantamount to encouraging drug use. In the context of the romantic ethos that is said to stimulate demand within consumer societies (Campbell, 1987), drug use has been situated as an 'intelligible form of the normatively sanctioned search for the extraordinary' (O'Malley & Mugford, 1991, p. 57; Race, 2009). As one might infer from this argument, much of the critical investment in pleasure stems from justified concerns to de-stigmatize drug use and drug users. Thus, pleasure tends to be evoked as a 'warrantable motive for, or descriptor of, drug and alcohol consumption' (O'Malley & Valverde, 2004).

For all its utility, the emergence of pleasure as a license for disapproved activities in this discourse – indeed, a 'warrant' – produces a regrettably dull conception of pleasure. Whether invoked to make drug use normatively intelligible, or subordinated to the priorities of harm reduction (Race, 2008), pleasure becomes a serviceable object or 'means to an analytic end' that ends up draining the concept of much of its energy and momentum – the

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2017.07.019
0955-3959/

very qualities that are said to make it exciting. Meanwhile, the move to frame pleasure as an empirical object invests it with fixed, determinable properties that can be investigated, positively known, defined and classified. Pleasure becomes an empirical property of the individuals, groups, or behaviours being studied, rather than a qualitative dimension of certain relations or encounters. Even studies that turn to pleasure to demonstrate the significance of the contexts and spaces of drug consumption end up producing pleasure as the exclusive province of the corporeal experience of drug consumers rather than something that might characterize and modulate the research relation (Duff, 2008). In short, researchers tend to think *about* pleasure or *against* it; we analyse, consider, investigate, invoke or ignore it. The philosophically inclined may even think *of* pleasure, or write *on* it. But in each of these scenarios pleasure is kept at arm's length and the researcher appears to remain unmoved – detached observers, objective scientists, conceptual experts, program directors, policy advocates, sharp critics – sober judges all, our sovereignty secured by the formal conventions of established theory, positivist research, institutional authority and/or disciplinary knowledge. *Where is the pleasure?*

A more radical empiricism might entail experimenting with the relations that constitute the research encounter. From the perspective of philosophers such as Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, A.N. Whitehead, Etienne Souriau and William James, the world does not consist merely of subjects and objects – minds and data – but is variously modulated by manifold relations that generate different modes of existence. For thinkers such as William James and Etienne Souriau, these relations are evident in even the most mundane units of everyday grammar. As James put it:

> If there be such things as feelings at all, *then so surely as relations between objects exist* in rerum natura, *and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known*. There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought . . . We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue*, a feeling of *cold* (James, 1912, p. 245)

In this passage, James is drawing our attention to how prepositions modulate relations between subjects and objects. Bruno Latour develops these ideas to propose new questions for research practice: 'if relations (prepositions in particular) are given to us in experience, *where then* are they leading us? Could their deployment allow us a total rephrasing of the question of knowledge?' (Latour, 2011, p. 4). For Latour, the ontology of prepositions introduces the possibility of experimenting with relations; multiplying feelings of the world to produce new possibilities for knowledge. The use of different prepositions to qualify our relations to things has implications for research, especially the positioning of that which is conventionally considered the 'object' of research (in this instance, drug and alcohol consumers). As Latour writes, 'the preposition *prepares* the *position* that has to be given to *what follows,* giving the search for meaning a definite inflection that allows one to judge its direction or vector' (2011, p. 7).

On this basis, this paper asks what happens when pleasure becomes a constitutive element in the *relations* of drug and alcohol research. What happens when we conceive of our work as thinking *with* pleasure, rather than simply researching pleasure or thinking *about* it? Pleasure might become a generative mechanism of research activity, just as much as it is attributed to the activities of alcohol and drug consumers. To be clear, this is not a recommendation that researchers take drugs (though nor would I insist that they should not). To think *with* something (or someone) is to pay attention to what they are doing or saying, to let them speak/act and even surprise us with their intervention, while framing our project as an exploration of what those actions are making happen for us (Stengers, 2011, p. 24). This 'us' could be autobiographical, but that is not the genre that governs most drug and alcohol policy research. Rather, 'we' can be conceived as a field of practitioners that gather around a problem or matter of concern, who are bound by (or capable of communicating and sharing) certain presuppositions, habits of thought and practical conventions. So the question becomes: What do the pleasures we encounter make happen for the habits of thought we bring to the table?

At a basic level, the proposal to think *with* pleasure confers a degree of symmetry between the activities of researchers and those we research. But this is not to conflate or confuse the respective projects of each party: while symmetry is proposed here, it must be emphasized that each is engaged in their own adventures or experiments, and quite differently situated, socially and materially. Obviously, researchers and those they research operate within very different constraints and instituted protocols, and are often subject to radically different material circumstances. They are differently positioned by the institutions and networks of exchange that order and sustain their worlds, and likely to be motivated by different concerns and aspirations, (whatever possibilities of congruence or affiliation might emerge from their encounter). My intention, in other words, is not to assert or project some shared identity between researchers and the researched; indeed the process of *thinking with* presupposes difference rather than identity. At the same time, to 'think with' is to acknowledge the capacity of each party to the encounter to affect and be affected by the other in unknown, surprising, potentially generative and/or unsettling ways; all the while aiming to achieve and affirm a shared interest in actively attending to the unknown directions such exchanges might take us.

Pleasure complicates these relations, since it references both an empirical quality of drug use and an aspiration for research in this clause. It is far from clear, moreover, that pleasure always (or even often) describes the experience of drug and alcohol consumption (let alone research!) Given the challenges, frustrations, complexities, dangers, disappointments, and bodily impacts each of these activities can entail, and the material differences that constrain and shape their experience, to assert that pleasure necessarily functions as a universal descriptor or governing principle of these activities is not merely misguided but presumptuous, to say the least. Furthermore, pleasure is notoriously difficult to define and there is little consensus about what it is or how it works. Discussions of the question abound in French philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism, and feminist and queer theory among other fields of inquiry, shot through with complex disputes about the definition and critical purchase of the concept and its relation to other relevant terms (such as desire). Within the discipline of sociology, the social formation of taste (which embodies expressions of pleasure) has inspired weighty tomes that produce social class as a determining force (Bourdieu, 1984). Other branches of this field leave the meaning and theorisation of the term open, allowing pleasure to serve more simply as a spur for the qualitative investigation of enjoyable activities. Affect theory offers highly developed but often incommensurable vocabularies and frameworks for conceiving bodily processes (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), some of which may involve, nuance or complicate what is commonly referred to as pleasure. Meanwhile, whole branches of psychological science are apparently devoted to measuring pleasure (Ritter, 2014): I cannot pretend to know what to make of the fact that there are measures of pleasure.

Despite these complications, we can perhaps agree that pleasure is a desirable experience, and/or something that is

Please cite this article in press as: K. Race, Thinking with pleasure: Experimenting with drugs and drug research, International Journal of Drug Policy (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2017.07.019