



What do we really know about doping 'effects'? An argument for doping effects as co-constituted 'phenomena'



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ABSTRACT

This paper focusses on the mutual concern of alcohol and other drug (AOD) and doping researchers with what might be broadly termed drug 'effects'. I argue that the main approaches to drug 'effects' (realism and social constructionism) have several important limitations, including the idea that reality is determined by either matter or discourse. In this way, both approaches are problematic insofar as they often fail to take account of the other, or do so in a way that can be incoherent or internally contradictory. In recent years the most radical intervention in these debates has come via the work of feminist science studies scholar Karen Barad. Combining insights from quantum physics and feminist theory, Barad has developed a new theoretical framework for understanding cause and effect. In this paper, I provide a broad introduction to and overview of Barad's work. I introduce Barad's concepts of 'intra-activity' and the 'phenomenon' and outline how these have been mobilised in recent AOD scholarship. I argue that Barad's theoretical framework has opened up new and important questions for AOD researchers, and that her theoretical approach has the potential to similarly inspire more critical work on doping and more nuanced analyses of doping policy that are no longer predicated on the assumption that drugs always do what we are told they do. I conclude with some observations regarding ways that Barad's theoretical framework might be deployed in future research into drugs and sport.

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The theme for the 2013 conference of the International Network for Humanistic Doping Research was 'What do we (really) know about doping?' and in their call for papers, the organisers posed a number of important questions for consideration. These included questions about the role of theory and method in doping research, how we formulate questions and objects for analysis, and what claims we make about the nature of the knowledge we generate through our research. In my view, the conference themes were underpinned by an appreciation of the need for more and more critical questions regarding the way that we approach our own work. One way this might be achieved is through exchanging ideas with those working in separate but related fields. In this respect, I have previously called for a greater dialogue between doping researchers and those whose work focuses on alcohol and other drugs (AOD) in a non-sporting context (Seear, 2013). In particular, my argument has been that the realms of AOD and doping research 'tend to operate as largely distinct fields, with little crossover of personnel, theoretical and methodological tools or ideas' (2013: 216).¹ This is a significant

and unfortunate separation because researchers in both fields share many common interests and concerns, including concerns about:

the way drugs are classified and categorised, the assumptions made about different classes of drugs and their effects, the ethics and politics of drug policies, the stigmatisation and marginalisation of people who use drugs, the development and implementation of methods for the surveillance and treatment of individuals who use drugs, the criminalisation of drug use in sporting and other contexts, arguments for and against decriminalisation, and the operation of harm-reduction policies. (Seear, 2013: 216)

The specific question of what 'effects' different drugs have on bodies is one of the many areas of mutual concern. It is also, I suggest, an especially important one. After all, much drugs research centres on questions of causality: Do drugs cause euphoria, paranoia, psychosis, illness, injury or even death? Do drugs taken by athletes improve or enhance performance, while also causing deleterious side effects? What theoretical and methodological tools are best suited to examining these questions? If indeed a causal link can be established, how might we best respond? This paper focusses on the mutual concern of AOD and doping researchers with questions such as these, and the broader phenomenon of drug 'effects'.

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¹ See also Dimeo (2011).

I explore why drug ‘effects’ are of central interest to both fields, how the ‘effects’ of drugs are typically described and conceptualised, the theoretical tools most often deployed in studying drug ‘effects’, some of the problems associated with those approaches and, finally, ideas for developing more theoretically sophisticated accounts of them.

Most research on drug effects, broadly speaking, adopts one of two theoretical approaches: realism or social constructionism. A realist approach ‘assumes drugs simply to be self-evidently concrete entities possessed of intrinsic characteristics and producing predictable results’, whereas a constructionist account sees drugs and their effects ‘as made in discourse, practice and politics’ (Fraser & Moore, 2011: 1).² In this sense, the realist/social constructionist debate is shaped by and in turn instantiates an awkward binary logic, one in which reality is seen as wholly (or primarily) determined by either matter (realism) or discourse (constructionism).

Recently, AOD scholars have sought to address this problem through recourse to feminist scholarship. Questions about *matter*, *cause* and *effect* have long been of concern to feminist theorists, of course, because ‘the materiality of women’s bodies has been used historically to limit their opportunities’ (Fraser & Moore, 2011: 3). The question for feminists, however, has been how to develop an account of the social world that attends to *both* matter and discourse, but without overplaying the role of biology in ways that risk a return to some form of biological determinism. In recent years the most radical intervention in these debates has come via the work of feminist science studies scholar Barad (1998, 2003, 2007). Combining insights from quantum physics and feminist theory, Barad has developed a new theoretical framework for causality that simultaneously acknowledges the ‘performative’ (Butler, 1993, 1990) dimensions of matter *and* discourse, while avoiding either biological or cultural determinism. Barad’s theoretical framework has been used to great effect in recent AOD scholarship, and in this paper, I make an argument for its utility in research into doping ‘effects’. In what follows, I provide a broad introduction to the notion of drug ‘effects’ and some of the main approaches to conceptualising them. From here, I outline some of the limitations of these approaches and introduce an alternative perspective in the form of Barad’s ‘posthumanist performativity’. I explain how Barad’s notions of ‘intra-activity’ and the ‘phenomenon’ have been mobilised in recent AOD scholarship, arguing that these concepts are perfectly suited to illuminating issues around materiality in doping research. I conclude with some suggestions for how Barad’s theoretical framework might be deployed in future.

1. What are drug ‘effects’?

In their excellent book *The Drug Effect*, Fraser and Moore (2011: 1; original emphasis) explain the multiplicity of meanings associated with the term ‘drug effects’:

Drugs are often spoken of in terms of their physical or psychological ‘effects’. In turn, they are generally treated as the origins or causes of other entities, crime being perhaps one of the most widely assumed. In this respect, beyond the commonplace observation that drugs as substances have ‘effects’ in the body and on society, we can also say that the *idea of drugs* (their malign powers, their ability to corrupt and so on) itself has effects – at the level of politics and discourse.

² I accept, of course, that there are multiple versions of realism, and that determinist and essentialist approaches of the kind I am describing here can also be found in psychological or sociological approaches to drug use. In this paper, I am principally interested in what Law (2011: 156) terms ‘Euro-American common sense realism’ pertaining to the biological sciences. A more detailed explanation appears below.

As this summary reveals, questions about the ‘effects’ of drugs are also always already questions about ‘causality’. Depending on one’s perspective, drugs might be understood to have various ‘positive’ effects, such as pleasure, euphoria and ‘enhanced’ performance. They are also understood to either *cause* or be *causally related* to a vast range of problems, including crime, illness, injury, psychosis and death. Often, however, the nature and extent of the relationship between drugs and those very same issues are contested or contestable. This includes the possibility that the relationship between drugs and drug ‘effects’ is inconsistent, unstable and complex. These are matters of central significance to both AOD and doping researchers. Duff (2013) went so far as to say that the AOD field is plagued by ‘interminable debates regarding the “causes” of problems related to the use of alcohol and other drugs’ (2013: 169). He mentions two specific high-profile examples of this: the claim, first, that methamphetamine or cannabis *causes* psychosis, and the claim, secondly, that alcohol consumption *causes* violence (especially amongst young men). Some researchers argue that there are straightforward causal links between substances and the phenomena in question. Others argue that there is little or no evidence to support such claims, or raise questions about the precise nature and extent of those causal connections, along with the role of other mediating forces in the production of social problems (see Duff, 2013).

Within the context of drug use in sport, one might point to similar regions of contest. These include disputes about the role of erythropoietin (EPO) in *causing* blood clotting, hyperviscosity and hypertension (see Lopez, 2011), or debates about the role of drug use and doping in *causing* death. Allegations of the latter kind are often supported through reference to ‘real life’ examples from sport, such as the cyclists Arthur Linton and Knud Enemark Jensen, the 18 Belgian and Dutch cyclists who died in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the well-known American sprinter Florence Griffith Joyner, who passed away in 1998 (see Dimeo, 2007; Gossop, 2013; Lopez, 2011; Møller, 2005).³ I will return to the significance of these examples shortly. Debates about cause and effect are extremely important for a number of reasons. The way that we conceptualise causality will invariably shape the way we think about both research and the way policies pertaining to drug use are formulated. What, in other words, is the nature of the specific ‘problem’ for policymakers concerned about issues like psychosis, illness, injury and death? What form should drug policies take? These, again, are matters to which I will shortly return.

2. Realism and drug ‘effects’

The orthodox approach for understanding drug use, doping and the ‘effects’ of drugs is typically known as ‘realism’. As Saldanha (2003: 420) explains:

Realism . . . ultimately believes that the physical and even social world itself discloses what it is, and can be fully explained if only scientists look hard enough.

Realists argue that certain substances – whether they be heroin or steroids – have naturally occurring attributes. As the science and technology studies scholar Law (2011) explains, realism (or what he terms ‘Euro-American common-sense realism’) is predicated upon six assumptions: that reality exists *out there*; that it is largely *independent of our actions*; that it *precedes our attempts to ‘observe’ or ‘capture’ it*; that it is *definite* in form, *singular* and *coherent*.⁴ As

³ See also Jonnes (1999) on the death of basketballer Len Bias.

⁴ Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider STS approaches in more depth. There are some parallels, however, between Barad’s ideas and those of STS scholars such as John Law, Annemarie Mol, Bruno Latour and others. Some of

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