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SCIENCE DIRECT
International Journal of Drug Policy 16 (2005) 316–325
THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF DRUG POLICY
www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo

Users, using, used: A beginner's guide to deconstructing drugs discourse

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Received 28 April 2004; received in revised form 27 April 2005; accepted 9 May 2005

Abstract

In recent times there has been a concerted effort from some researchers, reformers and practitioners in the alcohol and other drug field to convince policy-makers, politicians and others that heroin use is, above all, a health problem. This push has occurred in a discursive framework pitting progressive and compassionate harm minimisation strategies against more punitive programs of prohibition. Within this framework, harm minimisation strategies are frequently cast as a response to heroin use as a health problem, while prohibition and punishment are characterised as responses to drug dependence as criminal. We argue that this polarisation of crime/prohibition against health/harm minimisation is a political red herring.

Using deconstructive tools from contemporary social-political theory, we show how competing understandings of heroin use may mask a different kind of political contest. Exploring the discursive intertwining of people, practices and substances, we challenge the appropriateness of figuring different proposals to govern heroin use as a contest between science and politics, or of health-centred versus crime-centred strategies. We ask after the consequences of figuring criminal and medical arenas as rival frameworks for governing heroin use, and point to the perils associated with the apportionment of blame and victimhood therein. The broader aim underpinning our work is to locate and unpick political resistance to progressive harm minimisation strategies.

Keywords: Prohibition; Crime; Harm minimization; Health; Discourse; Heroin

Introduction

We were recently in the waiting area of a railway station and overheard a snatch of conversation between two women. The first seemed to be listing the faults of a man she knew—an ex-partner, we guessed. Among the defects she itemised – he was mean, selfish and irresponsible – was the man's heroin use. The other woman shook her head, and said, "Well, I believe it's a sickness." She said this as if it confirmed the man's immutable wickedness, as if it marked his body with evidence of a diseased, unchangeable nature. Later, we discussed what they'd said. Only days before, we had been arguing – as people committed to harm reduction often do – that many of the social ills associated with heroin use are the result of failure to understand drug use as a *health* issue. As Alex Wodak explains, for harm reductionists "the most important step is to redefine illicit drug use as a health and social issue rather than a criminal justice problem" (1999, p. 206). The women we'd overheard seemed to need no convincing that drug addiction is a health issue, but for them it was akin to syphilis or leprosy in times gone by—an illness which is (in itself) or warrants (in addition to itself) punishment. We began to question our assumption that shifting from a crime-centred to a health-centred approach in relation to drug policy would *necessarily* produce less harmful outcomes.

At the same time, we were becoming increasingly frustrated with what we saw, in current debates about heroin trials and supervised injecting venues, as a kind of competition between 'science' (serving harm minimisation) and 'politics' (serving abstention and prohibition). While we all are no doubt familiar with the appellation 'political' being attached to any decision that might cost our elected officials

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doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2005.05.002

votes, we felt, as researchers well versed in politics as an academic discipline, a little indignant that the merits of contemporary political theory were not being fairly tested. For us, 'politics' and political rationales mean much more than electoral popularity, extending to our capacity, as social beings, to analyse and understand the workings of power and regulation in our lives. Two questions emerged for us: What could *our* understandings of power and politics bring to debates about heroin use? Would figuring heroin use as, above all, a *health* problem substantially alter its regulation? This collaboration reflects some of our deliberations on these issues.

In what follows, we analyse key concepts informing abstentionist accounts of heroin in order to demonstrate the usefulness of methods loosely described as 'deconstruction.' The key difference between our contribution and existing, complementary research in this area (e.g., Campbell, 2000; Keane, 1999, 2002, 2003; Miller, 2001; Taleff & Babcock, 1998; Valverde, 1998) is that we mean to offer an accessible introduction to deconstruction, tailored specifically for those without much background knowledge of contemporary social and political theory. Deconstruction offers a useful way of exposing and interrogating the conceptual logics that underpin the exercise of power: its analytical orientation is emancipatory. On our view, making this mode of analysis accessible to stakeholders in drug policy debates is not merely desirable, but exigent. As we deconstruct the ways in which people, practices and substances are conceptualised, we develop an argument: that it is counter-productive to understand the crucial difference between abstentionist and non-abstentionist strategies as crime-centred versus health-centred approaches.

Our analysis offers a deconstructive reading of two commentaries – intended for a general rather than academic readership – written by a key figure in Australian and now international drugs debates, Major Brian Watters. Watters was until recently Chair of the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) and will join the International Narcotics Board in 2005. Watters' views resonate strongly with the US-led 'War on Drugs', although he is a military man of a rather different sort than one might expect to find in the Washington office—his army is the Salvation Army. Consequently, the militarism of his perspective in the war on drugs takes on some tellingly religious overtones. We focus on his commentaries (which represent his personal views rather than those of the ANCD [Watters, 2002, p. 25n]) because his position is so politically influential. His 'authoritative' perspective resounds within the public sphere in a way that other perspectives, particularly those of drug users themselves, do not. Those of us who would like to see a more democratic debate unfold and legitimacy extended to a greater variety of perspectives require canny strategies for negotiating figures such as Watters, and this is where deconstruction finds its point of purchase.

Our discussion is organised in four sections. We begin by unwrapping the most useful tools in any deconstruction set. Then we put those tools to work in deconstructing the conservative, abstentionist stance represented by Major Watters. We will examine, in turn, how he positions those who use heroin; how he conceptualises the effects of heroin; and how he characterises the substance itself. These elements correspond in a broad sense to our title: 'users', 'using', 'used'. In each section we will consider rationales used to characterise drug use as a health problem—identifying what is it that our fellow harm reductionists hope to achieve in positioning their strategies as 'health-centred' alternatives to prohibition. We then examine how the prohibitionist view manoeuvres itself in relation to harm reduction: sometimes this accords with our expectations, but sometimes it does not. We examine the effects of this jostling for conceptual position, with the aim of identifying toeholds for progressive purchase. In each case, we will test the assumption that progressive alternatives to abstentionist views would represent the triumph of health-centred over crime-centred approaches.

A deconstruction set

What is deconstruction? In short, it is a theory of the relationship between language and truth, and a constellation of strategies for interpreting texts. Developed by Jacques Derrida (1976; see also Hiedegger, 1961), deconstruction questions the belief that meaning exists independently of human language and interpretation. For Derrida, the meanings we ascribe to things (humanity, nature, love, drugs, etc.) are furnished by the conceptual structures of language. One such structure is *binary opposition*, whereby the meaning and value of a thing is defined through reference to what it is not—not by merely forming a distinction between it and another thing, but by placing those things in an hierarchical oppositional relation. As Elizabeth Grosz explains, binary oppositions "take the form of A and not-A relations, in which one term is positively defined and the other is defined only as the negative of the first" (1989, p. xvi). The opposed terms seem *inherently* good or bad, positive or negative, but in fact acquire this valuation through binary logic. At least two things are disavowed as part of the binary mode of attributing meaning and value to things: firstly, the ground of intermixture between the apparently opposite terms; and secondly the dependence of the positive term on the negative term, its requirement of a negative foil so that it may appear as valuable 'in itself'. Salient examples of terms and categories whose meanings are wrought through binary logic include nature/artifice, man/woman, mind/body, reason/instinct and civilised/primitive.

When we deconstruct binary oppositions, we expose the workings of assumption, commonsense and intuition. As Alex Wodak observes (2002, p. 52), a large part of the appeal of prohibitionist arguments derives from their 'intuitive sense:'

> This debate is difficult because a strongly intuitive argument ('drugs are bad, therefore they should be banned') with weak empirical support is pitted against a counter-