

Cultures of Consumption and Social Exclusion

Nigel South profiles drug use trends among young people.

Drug misuse has become prevalent among young people in ways unforeseen and unforeseeable just thirty years ago. Studies from the 1980s onward indicated dramatic changes in drug availability and consumption patterns and styles, with some predictions that 'things would never be the same again'. However the extent to which drugs have become a feature of everyday life and the currency of illegal leisure for so many, was a development of the late 20th century that cannot be overestimated in significance (South, 1999). *Drugs and related risk behaviours have come in from the margins and out of the subcultures to find places in the mainstream.* Of course this does not mean that the link between drugs and social problems is broken: drug and alcohol problems become disadvantages for many (though not most) users, potential risks for many others.

Research on 'young people' typically concentrates on ages between 14-25 though onset of drug use has been falling down the age range and some argue that youth and adulthood are being blurred or the transition is stretching.

Substantial evidence shows that teen years are significant for experimentation with illegal drugs, principally cannabis, amphetamine and other class B drugs (note - cannabis is likely to be rescheduled as a 'less harmful' class C drug shortly). From the early 1990s onward, occasional to regular use of Ecstasy and LSD (Class A) was also noted among 'older-young-people'. In the career of most drug users, 'escalation' to 'harder' drugs and long-term continuation of use is confined to a minority but this minority includes those who are most likely to develop problems. In all of this, it is important to acknowledge that alcohol plays a central role in the leisure and hedonism of most young people. The 2001 European School Survey on Alcohol and other Drugs found teenagers in Britain were more likely than their European counterparts to have tried alcohol, cannabis or ecstasy.

Results from the 2000 British Crime Survey indicate that "about half of those aged 16 to 29 have tried an illicit drug in their lifetime" though more recent use is less common, and "just over a fifth (21 per cent) of young people aged 16 to 29 had used class A drugs in their lifetime" (Sharp et al 2001: 1).

Noteworthy was that the proportion of 16-to-24-year-olds using cocaine in the last year rose significantly from 1 per cent in 1994 to 5 per cent in

2000 (ibid: 1). Reasons may include falling prices related to increased supply and hence easier availability, as well as fashion and social acceptability.

Cultures of consumption

One of the great transformative trends in post-war 20th century Britain was the inexorable rise of consumerism. Drugs increasingly became part of this diversification and celebration of consumption, from the subcultural sixties to the contemporary cocaine scene. In relation to the former, Jock Young noted in the early 1970s how 'alternative' cultures embracing anti-establishment gestures such as drug use also (and rather ironically) seemed dependent on the commercialised culture and products of big business, notably the music and style industries. By the 1990s, researchers such as Mike Collison found drug-using young offenders to be anti-establishment hedonists in some ways but with values that, in other ways, were very much of the materialist mainstream.

Among current cocaine or crack users some may develop serious problems. For others, a complex consumption style is managed in a way that avoids heavy dependence but combines cocaine with other drugs to enhance the high or bring the user down. While the picture is far from complete, recent research suggests that some of these cocaine users are 'ordinary' young people, integrating the drug into their everyday lives – although they may be ill-informed about differences between cocaine and crack, and about risks, particularly taking cocaine and alcohol together (Boys et al. 2001).

Prevention and young people

Drugs prevention is usually aimed at the young. Schools are recognised as a primary route for this purpose although many prevention efforts take place in the community and include diversionary activities and youth projects. Outreach or detached youth work can engage young people not otherwise involved in organised activities in the community. Drug related Home Office initiatives have increasingly sought to address the social exclusion agenda but also explore the possibilities for more effective communication about drugs and related risks. Various drug agencies have responded to changing trends by development of innovative approaches and publicity however it remains a recognised problem that drug services are in general aimed at adult users and young drug users are overlooked or, by definition, excluded.

The sociology of drugs and risk

Most young drug users are not at significant risk of becoming casualties - their experimentation is too fleeting, their involvement too occasional. The drugs prevention agenda is particularly directed toward these users. However, the Drugs Advisory Service and others have indicated that there are other young people who are at high risk of addiction and social exclusion. Such risk is strongly associated with certain background factors in their lives, e.g. mental health problems; initiation into crime; school non-attendance; unemployment as the norm; being 'looked after' (e.g. in care of the local authority); homelessness (not simply sleeping rough, but not having a settled place to call 'home'), and so on. Undoubtedly these are issues for drug prevention and intervention services. But they are also social policy issues and the sociology of social exclusion and risk has a role to play here. Now would seem a very good time for policy makers and practitioners to think sociologically and for sociologists to think practically.

References:

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