

The Gendering of Drug Use and the Absence of Gender

Fiona Measham explores the centrality of gender to drug use and berates the lack of robust empirical research on the subject.

Women's illicit drug use has been increasing rapidly in the UK and elsewhere in the developed world in recent years. The narrowing gender gap in lifetime prevalence rates across the 1990s suggests that gender is no longer a significant predictor of, or protector from, illicit drug use. Does this mean that gender is no longer of relevance to drug use? A consideration of the figures suggests that the relationship between gender and drug use remains the big neglected question in the field of substance use. This omission indicates both that drugs research is lagging behind and peripheral to the debates in mainstream criminology in terms of engaging with gender issues (covered elsewhere in this issue), and furthermore that we are not appreciating the full significance of the role of drug use to our understanding of wider society.

So where are the women? Official statistics indicate that the disproportionate concentration of young, male and minority ethnic offenders in the UK criminal justice system in general is also reflected in drugs offences, with a gender ratio of about nine men to every woman appearing in the criminal statistics. Self-report studies and household victimisation surveys show a quite different story, however, with a gender ratio of about one and a half men to every one woman experimenting with illicit drugs. Furthermore, research suggests that the biggest changes in terms of a liberalisation of both drug-related behaviour and drug-related attitudes can be seen in 'unexpected' sections of the population such as women and the over 40s. But whether women are considered irrelevant (because they are absent from official statistics) or gender is considered irrelevant (because women and men are increasingly equally represented in self-report studies), criminologists have barely begun to consider the myriad ways in which the supply and use of illicit drugs intersect with social structural factors such as gender.

The supply of drugs

In terms of the retail side of the drugs trade, my current research with top level supply syndicates and middle-market distributors reveals little evidence of significant involvement by women above the lowest levels of the supply chain in the UK. Some of the features of the retail trade — high profit margins, high status, flexible structure, and small organised cells — are both reasons for the appeal of trade and

also obstacles to women's involvement.

As noted by Maher (1997), the structuring of the illegal economy follows the pattern of the legal economy. As with legitimate business, where there is money, power and status there are few women. If women do infiltrate an employment sector, we have evidence to suggest that the occupational sector itself changes in form, that the money, power and status tend to ebb away (such as has occurred with the teaching and medical professions). In a multi-million pound cash trade which operates through violence, intimidation and bravado, employment opportunities for women are limited by the male bonding, networking and trust which are as integral to operations in gangland as they are on the golf course. With marginal roles such as mules, runners and drivers, women's high-risk low-reward involvement in the retail trade has consequent health and legal implications, as the British female prison population testifies.

The use of drugs

With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Ettore, 1992; Henderson, 1999; Plant, 1997; Taylor, 1993) the relevance of gender to drugs has been underestimated in both drugs research and service provision. The broad characterisation has been either that women's lives are worse than men's and therefore they take drugs to make them better, or that women's lives are getting better and therefore they take drugs to emulate men. This is the popular polarisation of drug use into the dichotomy of problematic/escapist or recreational/celebratory usage.

Problematic usage is linked to the depiction of women self-medicating for relief from poverty, depression and desperation, resulting in dependency, leading to entrapment in petty acquisitive crime and sex work to pay for their drugs. Recreational usage is linked to the contrasting characterisation of women's lives as increasingly mirroring men's lives in a variety of spheres such as increased education and employment opportunities, alongside converging consumption patterns including legal and illicit drug use. This is epitomised in the work hard, play hard 'laddette' culture much loved by the media which evokes swarms of young, single and 'up for it' party girls besieging the café bar cities of the Western world. However, neither the problematic nor the recreational stereotypes are illuminating of drug use or of the complexities of people's lives.

The dichotomous theorisation of female



criminality as the consequence of either women's oppression and victimisation (by individual men or wider society) or of women's liberation (the 'new female criminal') has been debunked over the last twenty years in mainstream criminology. Despite this we have edged little further in the field of drugs research.

Gender remains as central a determining factor of women's and men's drug use as of other criminal and deviant behaviour, because gender is central to an understanding of our experiences of leisure and work in the 21st century, to our earning potential, to relationships with friends, family and peers, to our construction of image and identity, to the management of our bodies and our sexualities.

The consumption of drugs is at the intersection between our outer and inner worlds and it is this which fuels the fascination for drugs research. Drugs provide the connection between global markets and individual veins, between our dreams and the realities of our lives. An understanding of drugs facilitates an understanding of the demands upon our lives, the complexities of leisure and work, our attempts to manage stress, pain and illness, to juggle competing demands, to determine what we want from the gendered, sexualised and racialised bodies we inhabit. Through the study of the consumption of legal, illicit and prescription drugs we can explore the boundaries and connections between our physical and emotional worlds, the desire for physical pleasure, for psychological and spiritual well-being, the tensions of indulgence and abstinence and of self regulation and relaxation.

At the core of drug use we can see the relationship between the individual, society and the state at the historical, socio-economic and cultural levels. The

history of drugs includes the history of migration, imperialism and economic exploitation, the development of capitalist consumer society, and of scientific and artistic creativity. How can we not consider gender? ■

Dr Fiona Measham is a lecturer in criminology at Lancaster University.

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