"What Goes Up Must Come Down": Exploring the Harms Experienced By a Group of Heavy Ecstasy Users in Melbourne and Discussing the Implications for Harm Reduction

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings from an ethnographic study of a group of young recreational drug users in Melbourne. This group of young recreational drug users derived many benefits from their ecstasy and other drug use, including sociability and pleasure; however, they also experienced a range of harms from their frequent drug use. This paper discusses these harms and then reflects on the implications for harm reduction policy.

METHODS

The data reported in this paper were collected over 14 months. During this period, ethnographic research [1, 2] was conducted among a social network of approximately 80 young people who regularly consumed ecstasy. Data collection involved two components: fieldwork and in-depth interviews. Fieldwork was conducted in a variety of restaurants, pubs, bars, nightclubs, music festivals and private homes. Field notes were made following episodes of fieldwork. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 core group members. Field notes and interview transcripts were stored and analysed using NVivo 7. The qualitative analysis was inductive, with emergent themes and theoretical issues reassessed as fieldwork progressed, and used to guide the collection of further data in an 'ethnographic cycle' [3]. Narratives were analysed using thematic and content analysis. The ethnographic analysis was informed by a review of epidemiological and qualitative research on alcohol and party drug use, as well as relevant aspects of the anthropological, sociological and youth studies literature.

RESULTS

This group of 'heavy' ecstasy users pursued ecstasy intoxication in a way that may be described by outsiders as 'excessive' or 'carnal'. Females estimated that they averaged around 2.7 ecstasy pills per session, while males averaged around 5.3 pills per session; however occasions where upwards of 10 ecstasy tablets were consumed were not uncommon. One of the themes that arose during fieldwork was that ecstasy was associated with a number of harms. The primary harms experienced by this group included "the sads" (mental health-related harms), being "scattered" (cognitive-related harms which negatively impacted employment), financial loss (lack of savings) and stigma-related social problems (loss of friendship with non-drug users).

DISCUSSION

These harms, although somewhat recognised in the broader literature [4-7], are not typically identified in popular harm reduction messages. Harm reduction messages that focus on risk of overdose and blood borne virus transmission, although potentially relevant to injecting drug users, are likely to be meaningless to recreational drug users. So what are some of the more relevant and realistic harm reduction implications for a group of young people who explicitly reject 'controlled' or 'moderate' drug use? And how should harm reduction be framed for those who articulate its ethos but pursue pleasure in practice?

CONCLUSION

It is time for harm reduction to deal with pleasure if it is going to bear any correlation with the real experiences of recreational drug users [8-10]. Where 'controlled' drug use is represented as self-evidently good, there is a risk of failing to grasp the dynamics of drug use, as well as some of the reasons why harm reduction measures are not always adopted by drug users. At the very least, drug campaigns, and the media in general, could avoid representing young party drug users as incompetent, disordered citizens, for example, in graphic images of young people experiencing ecstasy overdose. Messages that recognise drug user subjects as evincing competence, responsibility and a desire to reduce harm, whilst simultaneously pursuing pleasure, may be experienced as empowering by young drug users, thus enabling them to deal with drug-related problems more effectively, and create new forms of drug user identity and ethics.

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