

THE SOCIAL WORLD OF SWEDISH RECREATIONAL DRUG USERS AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF RISKS

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Abstract:

Research shows that since the 1990s there has been a trend in Sweden in which youth have a gradually more open attitude towards drugs and are increasingly more willing to experiment with drugs. In general, research show that drugs have become more normalized among youth in recent years.

During 2003 a colleague and myself conducted individual conversational interviews in Stockholm with 25 socially integrated drug users. The material is here used to analyse the informants' perspectives and perception of drug related risks. Using a social world perspective this article will look at how interaction and personal experience derived from the social world in question form the basis of the informants' drug perspectives. Further, the article deals with the informants' perceptions of risks, as well as their methods of minimizing the risks.

Introduction

At this point in Swedish drug research little is known about drug users who are situated outside the social control and care system. Researches indicate, however, that this is an expanding group. Swedish research shows that since the 1990s there has been a trend for youth to have a gradually more open attitude towards drugs (SOU 2000:126,11, CAN & FHI 2000). In general, research shows that youths' experiences with drugs have increased notably during the 1990s, especially the use of cannabis.

Previous sociological and anthropological research into youth cultures has been preoccupied with the oppositional stance to adulthood and conventional norms youths represent (Bucholz, 2002). The new drug trends, however, indicate that drug use among youths today cannot be regarded as such. Research shows that, as against being part of oppositional and specific fragments of the youth population, drug use is today spread over the entire youth population (Svensson, Svensson & Tops, 1998:2).

In order to investigate further contemporary drug use among youth, I have found it helpful to perceive this group as a cultural entity responsible for producing and negotiating cultural forms in its own right. In this manner the article takes Bucholtz stance as it emphasises “...*the here-and-now of young people's experience, the social and cultural practices through which they shape their worlds.*” (Bucholtz, 2002:532).

The aim of this article is two folded. I wish to show how drug-taking youths participate in a social world of socially integrated drug users. Secondly, I attempt to show how this approach provides a fruitful starting point for understanding the youth as active, cultural agents who produce, reproduce and respond to drug related risks. This article will first lay out the social world concept and relate it to the research material. The article will further analyse the common perspective on drugs which exists among the youths. Part of this drug perspective involves a particular risk perception and risk management techniques that will be developed in the latter part of

this paper. For concluding marks, I will argue that the findings presented shows that the drug taking youths are more familiar to Swedish conventional culture than it might seem at the outset. Hence, I am challenging the logic that behaviour that diverts from the well-supported restrictive drug policy (EMCDDA, 2001) in Sweden necessarily must be regarded as unique and distinctive behaviour.

Method

This article is based on 25 individual informal interviews² (Collins, 1998) with 8 women and 17 men between the ages 18 and 30. The informants were all “socially integrated drug users”, which means they fulfilled three criteria. Firstly, they all had a job, were students or had other kinds of legal economic resources³ and a permanent residence. Secondly, the informants used drugs during leisure time, outside studies and work. Thirdly, the informants did not have any contact with social authorities due to their drug consumption. What is important to note is that the informants had a structured everyday life⁴. Their drug use was in not the major activity of their daily lives. Instead, it constitutes an engagement besides various other social and work related activities⁵.

The informants were contacted through personal networks and by placing notices at restaurants which invited people to participate. People were further recruited through snowball sampling⁶ (Agar, 1980).

The research is explorative and reflexive in character. Originally the focus was broad, and the questions were open-ended. As the research progressed more familiarity with the field allowed for increasingly intensive probing of the informants’ perspectives and experiences.

² A colleague and myself conducted the interviews in Stockholm in 2003.

³ With other kinds of economic resources is meant that one was on paid sick leave and one had parental leave.

⁴ Two of the informants were applying for jobs at the time of the interview. They had a structured everyday life in the manner that they were actively applying for jobs and were not socially marginalised due to their unemployment. They had a permanent residence and access to saved up economic recourses.

⁵ The informants formed a heterogeneous group. They varied on attributes such as gender, social-economic background, education, occupation and age. Additionally, the informants differed in types and frequency of drugs consumed. 13 of the informants used cannabis 4 or more times a week. No other drug than cannabis was used on such a frequent level by any informant. They represent polydrug use, which is defined as “the use of more than one drug or type of drug by an individual — consumed at the same time or sequentially” (EMCDDA, 2001). The informants tended to use and experiment with many different types of drugs, but they also seemed to prefer one drug to others. The preferred drug varied from one informant to the other. Despite their differences, this article suggests that the informants should be viewed as members of the same group due to the social interaction they encounter when occupied with their special interest of drug taking.

⁶ The gatekeepers were not always capable of recruiting new informants. Hence, a snowball effect occurred for only three clusters. The sample includes one group in which 9 people have some personal relations, one group where 4 people have personal relations and one group in which 2 have personal relations. The rest of the informants are individual cases that have, as far as we know, no connection to the others.

The data program Nvivo has been used to code the material. After reading the interviews numerous times, themes concerning risk perception and drug use patterns began to emerge and were coded and then analysed. The search was seen as completed when no more themes seemed to appear.

The social world of socially integrated drug users

The informants of this research make up a social world which is a loosely connected universe of special interest (Shibutani, 1954:566). The social world notion derives from symbolic interactionism and three particular premises. Firstly, it is assumed that people act towards things according to the meaning that things has to them. Secondly, the meaning of such things arises out of social interaction in which people are occupied in fitting ones' actions to that of others. Thirdly, the meanings are dealt with in an interpretative process used when dealing with the things people encounter (Blumer, 1986). The three premises have particular significance in that the meaning of things and social interaction are important in their own right. This is placed at the heart of this investigation.

The special interest connected to drugs represents a point of direct interaction for the informants. Drugs are most commonly used in social circumstances in which the informants meet and mingle with the same people repeatedly.

The informants also influenced each other indirectly, for instance, through drug stories. In the interviews the informants often mentioned others' drug experiences. Evidently, such stories represented meaningful information and were used as resources when explaining their own drug decisions or drug perspective. A few informants, for instance, mentioned that if friends say that one type of ecstasy is bad, this is taken into consideration when buying ecstasy. Indeed, similar findings have been established in other research. Mayock (2002:117) found that drug users restrict and control their drug use based on local drug stories, peer advice and lessons from the media.

On the basis of direct and indirect communication the socially integrated drug users are part of a system of actors who are tied together and who influence each other⁷. The communication forms the basis out of which the meaning of drugs is developed. *"The meaning of objects for a person arises fundamentally out of the way they are defined to him by others with whom he interacts (Blumer,1986: 11)*. From this stance, it is clear that the meaning of things is not intrinsic to the object itself; instead it is a social product. Indeed, Becker (1973) has highlighted this exact point in relations to drugs.

The drug oriented perspective

⁷ It needs to be pointed out that there are different levels of participation within the social world in question. Some informants take drugs on sporadic occasions, for instance, just a few times a year, while others use drugs on a close to daily basis. It is, however, my argument that despite limited participation, a person should be regarded as a participant in the social world of socially integrated drug users, on the ground that they have some level of social interaction with other socially integrated drug users. None of the informants used drugs exclusively alone. Drug taking was first and foremost consumed in social circumstances.

A core feature of social worlds is that the participants have a shared perspective. *"Each social world is a schema of life - a way of acting, talking, thinking, it is an arena within which special meanings are shared, where one who is a part feels 'at home'"* (Shibutani, 1961:134). Following the line of symbolic interactionism the shared drug perspective within the social world in question is important to elaborate on, as it constitutes the basis for the youths' actions towards drugs. As many researchers have pointed out, people act according to their definition of the situation, and this is again influenced by the cultural and social location the people are in (Rhodes, 2000; Carpenter, Glassner, Johanson & Loughlin, 1998; Willis, 1990).

Overall, the participants in the social world in question view drugs in a positive manner. As long as drugs are consumed in a controlled and moderate way the informants regard drugs as fun. Drugs "spice up" leisure time and make certain occasions extra enjoyable.

Interviewer: What's the best thing about drugs?

Informant: Well, that is, well, that if you take amphetamines or cocaine, you become, like, you get the best self esteem, you are fucking social and nice and you...you are so fucking good...and like...yes, that's it, it is that positive drug experience which you have for that little point in time.

The informant argues that the positive state of mind that the drugs are expected to produce constitutes the main reason for using drugs. From the interview material, drug consumption does not appear as a response to negative feelings and difficult situations such as escape from a dull everyday life, depression or problems at home. Although such drug related factors were mentioned a few times, they appeared as exceptions rather than the rule. The positive aspect of drugs as enhanced pleasure in leisure time represents the most important meaning of drugs for the informants.

Of course it must be questioned if the mentioned positive effects of drugs do in fact represent the reasons for the informants drug use. Indeed, it is possible that the informants use drugs to overcome negative feelings but are unwilling or unable to recognise or admit to this. I will, however, argue that drugs in the social world in question are viewed as a positive element. Indeed, the informants spoke to a large extent about their actual drug experiences in the interviews. During the interview the informants laughed and smiled when looking back on these experiences.

A second important element in connection with the informants' drug perspective is that the positive effects of drugs were dependent on maintaining a controlled and moderate drug use. All the informants argue that they had control over the drugs they consumed, and that if they wanted to they could stop using illicit drugs without any further problems. They also felt that drugs did not interfere negatively on their daily lives and obligations.

It is difficult to determine if the claimed control in connection with drugs is visible outside the interview situation. This does, however, not need to be established here. What is important in this article is the shared meaning. Despite differences in personal attributes, frequency and type of drug consumption, the informants are bound together by a common perspective, namely that drug use *can* be kept at a moderate and

controlled level, and that this form of drug-taking is positive as it adds pleasure to leisure time.

Risk perception

Despite the national prohibition and drug preventive efforts, as well as personal knowledge of negative drug effects⁸, the informants decide to use drugs. From the authorities' stance the informants' behaviour might be regarded as irrational in disregard of risks connected with drug use. It will, however, become clear that this is not the case. Although it was secondary to the emphasis on positive aspects of drugs, the informants recognised and were concerned with the existence of drug related risks.

As Sørensen (2003) argues, the drug users' behaviour must be understood from the point of view that risk perception and evaluation are situational. Drawing from Douglas and Wildavsky's (1982) cultural theory of risk, I will argue that the understanding of risk as well as risk management is based on cultural experiences and premises. As already mentioned, the informants influence each other directly and indirectly. This communication is used as informative guidelines in personal drug decisions.

Despite its strength, Douglas and Wildavsky's (1982) theory neglects one important part, namely the individual component. Whilst accepting the importance of cultural and social elements, it is also important to include people's personal and vested interest, as well as past experiences in connection with risk perception (Skinner, 2000). For a more detailed understanding of how the individual and the social is interwoven it is helpful to elaborate on the theory of Mead (1934). According to Mead, the self has two phases, consisting of an "I" and a "me". The "me" represents the 'generalised other'. This is the part of the self that considers the social norms from the outside community and which is also visible for the outside world. The "I" represents the unsocialized part of the self.

Mead emphasises that people act towards their world on basis of the culture they are part of. Before acting, a person removes himself from the immediate situation and considers the guiding norms of his social world (me). However, this does not mean that personal actions are presupposed by culture. Within Mead's framework the "I" is important in decision-making, which leaves scope for individual interpretation of the situation. Additionally, and as Shibutani points out (1961) people are members of various social worlds. These are integrated in the self. Which "generalised other(s)" influence a particular decision and how a person interpret a situation depends on the individual as well as the cultural and social context.

The informants have personal experiences of drugs which they base present drug decisions on. One of the informants, for instance, had difficulties refusing

⁸ The informants mentioned negative drug experiences, the ones they had personally experienced and those they knew of through friends' experiences. Loosing control whilst under the influence of drug was one negative drug experience. Other were friendship and love relationship, which had been damaged partly by drugs. The informants also spoke about people that had become addicted or killed due to overdoses. These were however distant acquaintances rather than people the informants had close personal ties with.

amphetamines, and she decided not to use this particular drug again, as she was afraid of an amphetamine addiction.

Evidently, the informants have a social, subjective and experience-based risk evaluation scheme that diverges from the authorities' risk evaluation. From the informants' perspective, the risk calculations made by the authorities are unconvincing. The informants argue that expert advice does not represent truth because the calculations are too broad and made by people who, in the informants' view, lack first-hand and appropriate knowledge of the field. Indeed, Killworth (2000) found similar findings connected to risk evaluation in his research on British infantry soldiers in Northern Ireland. He argues that since the statistics and expert calculation of risk failed to be localised, the soldiers did not pay much attention to the calculations.

Self-control

Starting from a view that drug consumption can be controlled and kept at a moderate level, the informants perceive negative drug effects as avoidable experiences. In order to achieve, what the informants consider to be a safe and controlled drug use, the informants have various techniques of reducing risks. These are developed based on practical knowledge gained through interaction with other socially integrated drug users as well as personal experiences.

The informants risk-reducing strategy is to a large extent based around the issue of self-control. This is far from a rare phenomenon. Projects of self-control and discipline are indeed common features of modern society (Foucault, 1979). Consumers have the right to consume, but attached to this is the individuals' obligation to ensure "the right kind of consumption". Chocolate, for instance, can always be bought, however it is up to the individual to exercise self-control so that the products are preserved for special occasions. Opposed to a centralized power of control, control is internalized in the modern human being who willingly submits himself to self-discipline.

Worth mentioning in this connection is Valverde's work (1998). Valverde argues that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is organized around the principle of self-control. Inspired by Foucault, Valverde argues that AA becomes an ethical gaze. It observes and judges peoples' spiritual progress. In her words AA is an "*explicitly spiritual rationality of self-governing*" (Valverde, 1998:124).

Within drug research, the issue of self-control has also been analysed. Jackson-Jacobs' (2001) argues that the small group of college student crack cocaine users who he observed had various specific rules when preparing and smoking crack together. These practices served as self-control in connection with their cocaine consumption.

In the present study, the empirical material shows various different mechanisms of self-control. First of all, daily responsibilities function as control mechanisms. The informants controlled their drug intake by rejecting any drug consumption outside leisure time such as at work or during studies.

Interviewer: Have you ever felt forced to smoke (cannabis) 'cause everyone else is doing it and that you...ok, then you do it as well? Even if you have felt that the time wasn't right?

Informant: No, but that...well, I'm really good at that, if the timing isn't right or the setting, if I'm like going to work, that happens quite often 'cause I start at around 5,6,.. and then it happens that my brother comes home from work and then I have a lot of friends that come by and we go to the park before I'm going to work and they sit and drink beer and maybe smoke a joint and that, and then you are really keen, I'd really have a craving, but then I think like I have to go to work so I can't...then I just don't do it.

The 'I and me' mechanisms in connection with self-control is evident in the above. The informant states that he really would like to smoke a joint (I), but he refrains from doing so (me) after having considered guiding norms. The informants clearly separated work time from the time when it is acceptable and appropriate to use drugs and they adopted their behaviour according to what is expected of them as workers and students. Evidently, the informants were participants in various social worlds. In a complex society, Shibutani (1961) argues, there are various communication channels, and social worlds are loosely connected. In effect, people slip in and out of them. Indeed, this is a common feature of modernity. Giddens (1991) explains that with the fall of traditional society the modern human being has the ability to move between various destinations and environments. There are no traditions or fixed paths which presuppose or limit the number of environments the modern human being can be a part of.

The informants slip in and out of various social worlds, such as the social world of work, studies and drug taking. This does however not mean that the informants have multiple identities. Giddens (1991) argues that people use their different interests, choices and experiences to construct an integrated identity. Following this line of thought it can be argued that the informants do not have a master identity. They are not primarily socially integrated drug users. Nor are they first and foremost workers or students. Instead, the norms, rules and perspective of the various social worlds they are part of are selected according to the context they are in.

Through their membership in conventional social worlds, the informants are entangled in a project of living orderly lives. They strive to live up to their daily obligations and they regulate their drug consumption accordingly. Consequently, they conform to what is considered acceptable behaviour at work or whilst studying. In this sense, their membership in conventional social worlds functions as a measure restricting drug consumption. A moderate drug consumption level is important in order to remain socially integrated and being able to take care of daily responsibilities.

In addition to refusing drugs outside leisure the surplus value⁹ of drugs is important in connection to self-control. Except for cannabis, all drugs had a "surplus value" for the

⁹ Note that surplus value is not used in the most common technical economic sense. Instead it is used as something that adds positively to an already positive existing experience. This differs from seeing drugs as an "intrinsic value" where it is the drug in its own right that creates the "special" occasions (Knutgård, 2000:2).

Half of the informants used cannabis daily. Some of them implied that everyday drug intake becomes an escape from a grey and boring everyday life. Their everyday consumption

informants. This means that they drugs are seen as something which adds pleasure to a special occasion that already exists (Knutgård, 2000:2). Hence, drug consumption occurs most often on sporadic occasions. The informants made explicit that when drugs are used too frequently the drug experience loses its special feeling and is no longer fun.

“It should embellish everyday life, not just improve it. You should not use it every day or every week or every month, then it is better to use it every half year so you remember how it feels...”

The sporadic use of drugs is also connected to the view of drugs as a “social thing”, meaning that it was most often taken whilst together with others¹⁰.

The mentioned elements are likely to limit the informants’ drug intake, as there are reasons in everyday life for refusing drug consumption, and there are occasions where drug consumption is unthinkable. Many informants mentioned that they had laid off drugs for periods. Some did this as a response to worries that they were losing control over their drug use, others did it just because they “*did not feel like doing drugs for a while*”. In addition to the effects of rejecting drugs on occasions has for actual drug consumption, the mechanism gave the informants a sense of (re)gained control as they had proved to themselves and others that they could lay off or reject drugs if they wanted to.

Interviewer: How often do you use drugs?

Informant: (thinking). I do it...you can say I do it in periods...Yes, it goes in periods actually. ‘Cause, ‘cause there are periods where I don’t smoke at all. ‘Cause I decide that now I have to take control over my use of the drug. And then I quit. So then I don’t smoke...for maybe a month. Then I start smoking again....

Another self-control measure is to completely rule out the consumption of one or more drugs informants felt that did not fit them personally. The informants experiment with a wide range of drugs and they become accustomed to what effects the different substances give and which are the unwanted side effects. The accumulated knowledge is used to opt for and reject different types of drugs. Indeed, the informants are conscious consumers of drugs and the first hand knowledge gained from drug consumption increases their feeling of control.

Informant: As I said I was involved in techno/rave before a lot. When I moved down to Stockholm I was a hard rock fan and then later...I became part of that techno/rave thing so...and there were a lot of those...mind-altering drugs... LSD, ecstasy and so on. So through that I took it...I used too much so I got a problem...

Interviewer: A problem? How so?

represents a removal from the real world for a limited time, after work or studies. Many of the informants who used drugs on a daily basis felt that the drug had lost its effect as a surplus value. Instead the drugs gained an intrinsic value. Cannabis is the only drug that the informants use on a daily or close to a daily basis. In the social world of socially integrated drug takers cannabis has a special status as it is viewed as the only drug that can be consumed daily without the consumer losing control over the drug as well as his socially integrated life.

¹⁰ Cannabis was an exception. Frequent users consumed cannabis whilst alone.

Informant: Yes, well I became depressed and...and I can't see another reason for that than that there must have been reasons in my use of narcotics. Exactly those drugs, ecstasy especially. So I quit that. I don't use that anymore.

The informants also control their drug use through personal rules on priorities. A number of the informants emphasised that they would never borrow money to buy drugs. In periods with scarce money the informants made clear that the little money they had would go to rent or clothes that they wished for, and that they would lay off drugs for a while. According to the informants, they get their priorities right, as they are in control over the drug and not the other way around.

Informant: It's not as if I would get into debt for buying ... 'cause that feels...no...I get anxiety attacks if I don't pay the rent and...that far I have not gone...Its still like...I know where I'm supposed to put the money...so that feels right.

Environment control

The informants also minimise risk by controlling their surroundings. This is, for instance, bound to personal trust. Influenced by Giddens, Caplan (2000) argues that due to the increasing growth of expert systems it has become impossible for individuals to comprehend all systems they are dependent on in their everyday lives. Additionally, people have reason to question expert systems due to the ambiguity and constant changes of scientific findings. The result, Caplan argues, is that people base their decisions increasingly on trust. Indeed, the informants argue that their drug behaviour is not very risky as they personally or indirectly know and trust the providers of the drug they consume. The drug providers are people the informants can count on to deliver "quality goods". This is especially the case with ecstasy. By knowing the "brand" of the pill as well as the provider the respondents felt confident that they would get the type they were most pleased with. Trust opened up space for a notion of control and the ability to minimise risks.

Informant: I mean that, let's say it's ecstasy...it is not enough for them (her friends). They need to know what it is, what type of Ecstasy for instance. And..

Interviewer: How would they know that?

Informant: That is...the only thing you can know is if someone...if the person who has gotten the drugs...know that the person who sold it usually sells good stuff."

Another measure of environment control is to carefully choose the social circumstances of drug consumption. The informants emphasise that it is important that they are in a safe environment when taking drugs. Many factors were included in building such surroundings. For instance the "right kind of people" needed to be present. These are people whom one feels safe with. It was, for instance, considered important that they could trust their friends to look after them. This constitutes a precaution in case of bad drug experiences.

In addition to the previous point, the people present when taking drugs also need to give off the "right vibe" in order for the drug experience to be successful. As mind altering substances can make the drug taker move into unknown states of mind, the informants felt that others present needed to be people one can relax with. It was also argued that one needed to feel comfortable with those present when consuming drugs, meaning that they felt that they could speak freely and about any possible topics.

In addition to social circumstances, the physical environment was a point of control. The informants mentioned the importance of a safe place. This might for instance imply a place with the opportunity to get home quickly if one felt ill. In connection with LSD, a safe place was often considered to be out in the woods, far away from the city's noise and chaos that might have bad effects on the drug experience.

It is also important to note that the informants had specific techniques directed at the body for minimising drug related risks. Eating healthily before and after a drug intake is one example. Additionally, drinking enough water, yet not too much water, under the influence of ecstasy was understood as important.

Worth mentioning in connection with environment control is the lack of expressed concern for societal control systems. Certainly, the informants were careful with taking drugs in public. For the most part drugs were consumed in private houses or in uninhabited public areas such as in the woods or in big parks, away from the public gaze. When taking drugs in more public areas the informants spoke about being extra careful to avoid being detected by critical eyes. Except from these few mentioned precautions, the police or other possible control systems seem to have little effect on the informants' drug perspective and considerations. Overall, the informants did not feel anxious about the social control systems in connection with their drug taking.

Cultural boundaries of deviance as risk minimizing techniques

Within the social world in question there is a notion of taboos connected to drugs. All of the informants were for instance negative to heroin and drug injection with needles¹¹.

Informant: I have a friend that was deep in the shit. And I lived together with this guy earlier, and he moved to Greece and he died of an overdose. But that was heroin I think. But that is something...I have never been involved with heroin, I have never dealt with needles or anything like that. Never. That is not, that is not something I would ever do...

Interviewer: How come?

Informant: 'Cause it is, for me that is to go too far. That is something you can't control the same way, if you shoot it into yourself sort of, that feels dirty for me sort of.

Heroin and needles can be seen as a constructed border that the socially integrated drug users refuse to cross. The border is closely connected to distinctions between "we" and "they". Indeed, the transgressions needles and heroin constitute, are designated the drug abuser. The informants represented the drug abuser as someone who has lost control over his drug intake as well as their life in general. Departing from the point of view that drugs can be controlled, people who become addicted are viewed as particular kind of people. The informants mentioned that drug abusers have weak psyches or must have had a poor upbringing. Due to these elements they

¹¹ Most of the informants said they would never take heroin or inject drugs with needles. Only two informed us that they had tried heroin, and both of them argued that they would not try again.

constitute a risk group more likely to become addicted to drugs than the informants as it leaves them weak and unable to handle the substances.

Interviewer: Why do you think she became addicted?

Informant: lost control, and didn't really...had too much of a weak psyche to begin something like that (consuming drugs) in the first place.

Another risk group identified by the informants are minors. The informants showed concern regarding research findings and personal knowledge about increasingly younger drug users. Some of the informants were also concerned about younger siblings' eventual drug use. Minors are perceived as less knowledgeable and hence incapable of handling and controlling drugs.

By looking at ones' own group as diverging from risk groups the informants create a psychological distance between themselves and others. As Sørensen (2003) argues, this functions as a cognitive trick which is closely related to a mode of evaluating risks connected to drugs. The drug users “*more or less consciously identify the high risk group, which risk is projected on to, and consequently they reach a feeling of being in relatively better control*” (*My translation, Sørensen, 2003:73*). In avoiding elements associated with, for instance, the drug abuser, the informants felt there was little chance of losing control over their drug use.

A drug problem in the social world of socially integrated drug users

The informants are aware that the various control mechanisms do not totally protect them from potential drug-related risks. Some of those interviewed admitted that their drug consumption had become problematic for periods. The informants' perceptions of what their drug problems entailed were however not associated with a physical dependence to drugs as might often be perceived. Indeed the informants talked about such a drug problem, but only as something drug addicts experience.

The socially integrated drug users' potential problematic relation with drugs derives from specific social contexts in which a psychological need for the drug arises and not so much residing in the substances in their own right.

Interviewer: So when you say addicted, what do you mean then?

Informant: Well I don't mean addicted in that you need to have it every day, but, well I see an addiction even when you are not addicted really...just if you have this urge after something, for instance that you have to have it for partying, then I think you are addicted.

Parties are typical contexts in which the informants might experience a drug craving. Some informants argued that a drug problem becomes evident when a person consumes some kind of drugs every time there is a party. It was then argued that the person has become unable to party without drugs; hence he is no longer totally in control over the drug consumption. Others did, however, mention that the problems first arise when the frequency of parties rises. When parties occur too often there is also a danger that the drug consumption increases in frequency, and this might

interfere in their daily lives and thereby become what the informants view as problematic drug consumption¹².

In both of the above cases, the environment is the focus, and it is also the environment that is seen as what needs to be avoided or changed for the person who has a drug problem. Many of the informants commented that if they would experience a drug problem the best resolution would be to leave Stockholm. Others argued they would avoid certain drug-taking friends or avoid going to certain parties. Evidently, it is not only important to control the environment in order to maintain a moderate and controlled drug use, but also when it comes to dealing with problems that arise when control mechanisms fail.

A few of the informants had in periods slipped into an excessive drug intake in which they had a daily consumption of drugs other than cannabis. In such periods the informants had gained increased possibilities of drug consumption. During summer vacation, for instance, everyday obligations might be low or non-existent. Control mechanisms thereby also disappeared, and this allowed an excessive drug intake without this interfering with their socially integrated lives. Additionally, the summer is a period where there is a rise in festival events and parties, hence there is also an increase in occasions where drugs are easily available. All the informants who had had an excessive drug intake shifted back to a moderate drug use after some time.

Only a minority of the informants reported that they had personally experienced problematic or excessive drug consumption. More could however comment on others who had. The same reason as above was often mentioned, namely that the friends who previously had been partying only once or twice a week were now doing it three or four times a week. This was viewed as negative, as it was seen as a sign of the person moving beyond what can be considered a controlled and moderate drug use. Many stated that they had lost contact with some friends due to their excessive drug consumption. Others reported that they or others in the peer group had tried speaking to their friends whom they were concerned about.

Informant: Well, his friends tried...tried, he is not the easiest guy to talk to, but it is.. you don't wanna be on him all the time, but yet you wanna help him out of it. There were people who tried talking to him, people that smoke (marijuana), that talked to him, and he realized himself that he had a problem. Ehm, well he was an extreme case maybe, he was the only one from our group of friends that thought it was okay to sit in the pub and then later take a walk, smoke (marijuana) and then come back, every day...

Evidently, an excessive use does not necessarily mean a move out of the social world of socially integrated drug users into the social worlds of drug abusers. As seen above, there is a threshold within the social world of socially integrated drug users that one should not cross. Nevertheless, at crossing there is a possibility of return.

¹² At the outset it was made evident that the informants only accept a daily drug consumption of cannabis. Hence, too much partying, and an excessive drug intake should be seen as when drug consumption of other drugs than cannabis occurs more than 3 times a week.

Conclusions and discussion

The material of this article has been gathered through conversational interviews, and the setting is likely to influence the material (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). The analysis is also based on what the informants say, and it cannot be presupposed that the presentations are accurate recapitulations of the “reality out there”. People strive towards positive self-presentations (Goffman, 1990) and what a person say in face-to-face encounters might be skewed in relation to behaviour in other contexts.

Although this bears implications for the validity of the material it does not mean that the results presented here can be discounted too heavily. Qualitative research exist at a “lived border” between reality and representations (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997) and the researcher must be sensitive to the fact that the informants live in the reality the researcher wants to analyse, as well as representing personal experiences in the specific interview situation. Hence, what is said in the interviews is not necessarily visible in action. Undeniably, one cannot be assured that just because the informants claim so, they always refuse consuming drugs before they go to work.

It can, however, not be assumed that the presentations have no connection to the social world the informants are members of. Indeed, the presentations should be valued and paid attention to as an indicator of how the informants view their own social world and how they like it to be perceived by others. Although this might not reflect an exact picture of “the world out there”, the view of how one sees one’s social world has bearing on actual behaviour. Additionally, the interviews encouraged the informants to reflect on their real life experiences, and although this gives an interpreted picture the informants’ narratives must be considered to have strong connections to actual experiences. I have no reason to believe that the informants were totally inventing their stories.

In this article, the social world concept has been applied in order to investigate the culture of drug taking youth. Despite the fact that the informants represent varieties and heterogeneity in personal attributes, it has been argued that they are participants in the social world of socially integrated drug takers. On the basis that they all have an ordered lifestyle and that they share a special interest in using drugs outside work and studies the informants communicate directly and indirectly. The communication and actual drug experiences are further, the basis of the creation of a specific drug perspective, which guides them in their risk management.

Clearly, those in the world we have studied differ from government representatives on drug perspectives. The government focuses on the great risk of drugs and how to terminate use. The fact that the informants use drugs does not mean that they do not consider and respond to risks. Indeed they do. Within their social world risk is manipulated, negotiated, changed and responded to. Evidently, the social world of socially integrated drug users is entangled in a project of minimising drug related risks.

Environment- and self-control as well as creating and responding to cultural boundaries give the informants a *feeling* of control. In this manner, risk management does not just have significance on actual drug use. Risk management is also a manifestation of a strong and controlled identity. Indeed, drugs are widely known as

something a person can lose control over. From this stance, a controlled and moderate drug use proves a strong identity.

The notion of control is also important to the drug experience in its own right. The informants argued that a drug influence is better than being drunk, as only the latter involves losing control over both body movements and mental state. A drug intake, on the other hand, does not mean a loss of control. The informants argued that although their state of mind would change with drug consumption they would maintain control. A drug high is perceived as better than alcohol intoxication as only the former is “a controlled loss of control”.

Indeed, drug use can be seen as a mode of doing identity. The informants distance themselves from the drug addict who has a weak psyche and they define themselves as mentally strong and controlled people through drug consumption. Inspired by Measham (2002), it can be argued that the socially integrated drug users “do identity” through “doing drugs”.

In Sweden there is a strong commitment to the legal definition that assumes that all consumption of illicit drugs constitutes an abuse. Hence, there is no official differentiation between use and abuse of drugs. The informants do, however, make this separation as they claim that their controlled and moderate drug use differs from the abusers’ uncontrolled drug consumption. This perspective is in line with a more general discourse that assumes that all drug use will lead to an addiction which leaves the person irrational and incapable of their own decision-making in connection with their drug use. Research has however attempted to disprove this discourse by showing that abusers are indeed rational people. Goldberg (1999) argues that problematic drug use is a choice as destruction is a primary objective. Lander (2003) shows that the female abusers she followed for over a year were active agents in connection with drug use, as they clearly regulate their drug use in order to minimise drug related risks.

Given that the drug addict is a rational consumer of drugs and that he also develops different strategies of risk reduction connected to drug use, is it appropriate to place the informants of the present study in the same group as drug abusers? I will argue that there is an important difference. This can, however, not be reduced to levels of addiction of drugs, nor quantity or type of drugs consumed. What differentiates a problematic drug user from the informants of this study is merely the level of social integration. People who escalate into frequent drug use usually come from marginalised and problematic backgrounds (Goldberg, 1999, EMCDDA 2001). They tend not to lead socially integrated lives. Further, poorly socially integrated people are weakly effected by the environment (Skog, 1991). Hence, one can assume that the control strategies visible from the present study are not applicable for problematic drug users.

The informants direct their drug use so that it does not destructively interfere with their daily responsibilities. Research shows that psychosocial background, which many problematic drug users have, leaves them without a decent chance on the job or the education market (Goldberg, 1999, Lander, 2003). Hence, it must be assumed that problematic drug users rarely have the same priorities as the informants of this study. Additionally, research show that problematic users not only use drugs for heightening

life quality, they also use it to escape a dreadful life (Lander, 2003). Hence drugs do not just have a surplus and intrinsic value, as is true for the informants. Drugs for problematic users also constitute a form of self-treatment which enables them to deal with their situation

In addition to problematic drug use, a traditional point of departure among drug researchers has been to view the people in question as part of a counterculture or subculture. Indeed, researches have often viewed drug taking as a demonstration of rebellion to, or rejection of mainstream culture (Allaste and Lagerspetz, 2002). Often, such research is preoccupied with class differences. Lalander (forthcoming) has, for instance, conducted a study on a group of young immigrant males from Chile in Sweden. Lalander argues that the youth's drug consumption must be seen in relation to the members' marginalisation and alienation from Swedish culture and society.

The informants of this study calls for a different understanding. They are by no means in opposition to mainstream society. The informants do not mention a struggle against society or the establishment. Indeed, the opposite is true, as they value and adjust to social structures.

As opposed to seeing the youth as members of a subculture or counterculture, they have here been presented as members of a loose social world bound together by a specific perspective and actions towards drugs. As opposed to emphasising what the informants differ from, this article has been emphasising the culture and the perspective of the people in question. From this stance it is evident that instead of posing similarities to problematic users it might be more appropriate to look closer at some of the similarities the informants have to mainstream society.

Social worlds should be understood as dynamic concepts, and loose worlds operate within other social worlds. The informants' drug perspective, which clearly separates drugs and daily life, do not have a "master status" as drug users. They are part of the social world of work or studies as well. Indeed, they are integrated participants of the mainstream society and culture. In the remaining part I will look specifically at Swedish alcohol culture as a point of correspondence.

Drinking alcohol is socially accepted in Sweden, but only under specific conditions. In addition to the legal formal rules of the alcohol business, alcohol in Sweden is strongly bound to informal and normative rules. Alcohol is, for instance, closely connected to leisure and a notion of giving oneself up to the moment. Drinking is viewed as fruitless and it is therefore limited to Fridays and Saturdays (Lalander, 1999). This is manifested in that alcohol is separated from the work place. The notion that one needs to be in control whilst at work, excludes alcohol from this sphere.

Further, Swedish alcohol culture does to some extent allow intoxication. Room (1975) argues that whilst there are "official norms" which do not accept heavy intoxication, there are specific occasions and settings in which heavy drinking is approved of, even encouraged. This is visible at Midsommarafton (Midsummer eve) which is best described as a "*loose social world of heavy drinking*", which many people slip into Room, 1975).

The socially integrated drug users belong to the national frame of alcohol culture, yet in a modified manner. The majority of the informants made clear that they took drugs because they wanted to have fun and enjoy themselves on special occasions. In Parker's words (1996) the youth were involved in the "purchase of time out". As is also part of the alcohol culture, they are engaged in giving themselves up for the moment. The informants share the national culture that assumes that mind-altering substances should be allowed, but only in connection with self-control measures. Indeed, the youth are active cultural agents responsible of forming, reproducing and changing cultural forms. Clearly, they modify parts of the national alcohol culture so that it also fit within the frame of illicit drug taking.

The informants distance themselves from drug addicts. Indeed, this is not surprising. To categorise is a natural and unavoidable human behaviour as it is the manner in which people make sense of their world (Boréus, manuscript). Categorisation is also essential for identity formation (Young, 1990:43, Hansen, 2000, Salasuo and Seppälä (forthcoming, Thornton, 1995). Indeed, social groups are relational. The informants construct the drug abuser as the negative other social group who is unable to control a drug consumption. This category is productive as it allows the informants to construct a positive and legitimate self-presentation in relation to their own drug use.

The differentiation the informants make between themselves and the drug abuser is symbolically important to the informants. Additionally, as has been argued above social integration is an important element of differentiation between the two groups. Nevertheless, paying attention to the distinction between these two groups should not overlook the obvious similarity: both the social groups are engaged in illicit drug taking. The question thereby must be asked: might the informants at some point in the future become part of the group they so strongly want to distinguish themselves from? Indeed, this is a legitimate and important question to pose. Although they might not think they will be affected by them, the informants are aware of the dangers of drug taking and that they are not totally immune to them.

Needless to say, the dangers of drug taking must be taken seriously. In order for drug preventive measures to reach the youth it is however important to build a ground for productive and functioning communication channels. Above, it has been shown that the informants share basic ideas of the conventional culture. They might thereby be more similar to the average man on the street than what might be assumed at the outset. This constitutes a productive starting point for drug prevention. Indeed, in order to establish contact with the drug taking youth, attention must be paid to their worldview. The youth need to be treated as the rational and knowledgeable consumers of drugs they claim to be. Only from this point can there be a dialogue in which the youth themselves will feel understood.

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