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"The Great Unmentionable": Exploring the Pleasures and Benefits of Ecstasy from the Perspectives of Drug Users

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> Basically that's how I could describe it, a pleasure overload. (018)
>
> All my friends say like, you know, I get very, very friendly. They say like they look at me and they think that I've got like sunshine flying out of my butt. Like I'm so happy …. It's like…I can't be any more happy. (036)

Introduction

Legal and illegal ingested substances have long given pleasure to those who have consumed them. Whether that be the Yanomamo using tobacco in Brazil (Chagnon, 1983), Hippies smoking marijuana in Haight Ashbury (Cavan, 1972), Africans drinking beer in a Bulawayo beer garden (Wolcott, 1974) or English youth popping ecstasy pills in Manchester (Parker et al., 1998). Given the extent to which these substances have provided individual pleasure as well as social and communal enjoyment, one is forced to ask the question: why then is it that so much of the research on ingested substances has ignored this central feature? Why, to quote Moore and Valverde, is pleasure "the great unmentionable?" (2000, p.528). While it may be understandable that drug and public health researchers should focus more on the social and personal problems, it is nevertheless surprising that the element of pleasure should have been so often overlooked in the thousands of articles written on the use of illicit drugs.

This neglect of pleasure and fun from much of the drug research literature is particularly striking when we examine the contemporary research on ecstasy and other "club drugs." In spite of the fact that researchers have christened the clustering of drugs associated with nighttime dance events as "club or party drugs," the element of pleasure is still absent. It is as though pleasure has become unseeable within much of the research. Even when notions of pleasure or fun are allowed to enter the picture, they are mentioned merely to be denied or negated. For example, the title of an informational article on a government prevention website speaks for itself: "Club Drugs Aren't 'Fun Drugs'" (Leshner, 2005). "Governmental discourses about drugs and alcohol…. tend to remain silent about pleasure as a motive for consumption and raise instead visions of a consumption characterized by compulsion, pain and pathology" (O'Malley & Valverde, 2004, p. 26). The absence of any significant discourse about pleasure within drug research means that a central component of why people use mind altering substances is ignored. As Parker and his colleagues have remarked, "we need to place …. pleasure in the formula. Drugs are used because they give enjoyment" (1998, p.133). [1]

While many different social, historical and political reasons could be suggested as to why the pleasure element has been largely ignored in so much of the research literature, one possible

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[1]We do not wish to suggest no research has been done on pleasure and drug use, but instead to emphasize the extent to which such issues have been generally neglected. For examples of research on pleasure, drug use and addiction see Ettorre (1989)Peele (1985) and Warburton, (1994; 1996).

contributory factor would seem particularly relevant. [2] Bearing in mind its underlying public health-philosophy and associated problem-focused perspective, research in the drug field has focused understandably on illicit drugs as dangerous substances, which unless strongly controlled by enlightened social policy, create problems and entail social and physical costs for the individual and for society as a whole. This approach views youthful drug use as especially dangerous because young people are perceived as "a highly vulnerable sector of the population" (Ettorre & Miles, 2002, p.176), involved in risky consumption and likely to be "victims of their own irresponsibility" (2002, p.178). Young people are viewed as essentially passive and in need of protection, and consequently "the agency of young people is largely neglected" (2002, p.174). Given such a perspective on the dangers of drugs, it is not surprising that the active pursuit of pleasure on the part of young people would be downplayed or ignored. Furthermore, focusing on the risks and problems of drug use is not surprising given the extent to which notions of risk permeate much of contemporary thought, not solely within the drug and medical professions but also within society at large. This preoccupation is also true within other social science research literature, which has emphasized the role of risk in everyday life (Beck, 1992;Douglas, 1985;Giddens, 1990). Unfortunately, by examining risk solely from a problem perspective, drug researchers have tended to ignore the possibility that for many young people taking risks may be an important source of pleasure and excitement (Hayward, 2002;Reith, 2005).

In order to begin to re-adjust this imbalance, and in an attempt to re-locate enjoyment at the center of the drug using equation, the aim of this paper is to explore the elements of pleasure in the drug using experiences of a sample of young ecstasy users who frequent electronic music dance events in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unlike much of the research on youthful drug use, which views young people as both passive recipients and "inadequately formed adults" (Maira, 2004), we adopt an approach that views young people as active players negotiating their lives within certain social-structural and cultural constraints. Utilizing recent theoretical developments in both cultural studies and cultural criminology, we will examine in-depth qualitative interview data to explore the ways in which these young people experience the pleasures and fun in taking ecstasy and attending dance events. While we are aware that there may be other perceived benefits from taking ecstasy, in this paper we focus on the benefits that are connected to issues of pleasure and fun, as this emerged as the dominant narrative utilized by our respondents to explicate their experiences with ecstasy. In so doing we hope to shed light on why taking these substances is so appealing to so many young people.

Contemporary Ecstasy and Club Drug Research

Contemporary club drug research has focused primarily on three elements. First, researchers have examined the potential problems of using ecstasy and other club drugs, primarily focusing on the associated physical and psychological problems, such as depression, increases in heart rate and blood pressure, dehydration, hyperthermia, or possible seizures (Asghar & DeSouza, 1989; Dowling, 1990; Maxwell, 2005; McCann et al., 1998; Milroy, 1999; NIDA, 1999; Peroutka, 1990). Although MDMA is said to be physically non-addictive, users may become psychologically dependent and may subconsciously use the drug as a form of self-medication for underlying disorders (Jansen, 1999).

Second, researchers have noted the extent to which ecstasy and other party drugs, especially amphetamines, are strongly associated with the dance scene (Boys et al., 1997; Deehan & Saville, 2003; Measham et al., 2001; Soellner, 2005). Although research has suggested that marijuana is used more extensively than ecstasy (see for example Tossman et al., 2001),

[2]Whereas Partridge (1978), for example, suggests a more socio-cultural explanation, arguing that there exists a long-held European-North American consensus view that illicit drugs are inherently bad because of an intense dislike and mistrust of altered states of consciousness, Tiger (1992) has suggested that industrialized societies have devalued notions of pleasure.

especially in the stages before and after the event, it is ecstasy which has been identified as the quintessential drug of the international club and rave scene (CEWG, 2000; Lenton et al., 1997). Epidemiological literature has also emphasized the extent of drug use among club and rave attendees, as Measham and her colleagues note, "the key conclusion to be drawn …is that clubbers are extremely drug-experienced" (2001, p.96). These studies not only suggest a strong association between dance events and drug use, they also argue that increases in the use of ecstasy and other club drugs by young adults reflect the increasing involvement of young adults in the dance scene (Sherlock & Conner, 1999; Ward & Fitch, 1998). [3]

Third, researchers have examined the socio-demographic characteristics of the users, especially their age and gender. The majority of attendees at dance events are teenagers and young adults, both male and female, and from the available research this trend appears generally consistent in different countries (Calafat et al., 2001; Measham et al., 1998; Van de Wijngaart et al., 1999). While no representative surveys have been completed on either the age or gender ratio of attendees at clubs, raves and parties, researchers have emphasized the extent to which young women are a significant presence (Hutton, 2006; Parker et al., 1998; Measham, 2001).

Overall, while this literature has been particularly important in providing information on the problems associated with ecstasy, contemporary drug-using patterns, and the characteristics of the users, it has generally ignored both the role of pleasure and fun in consuming the drugs and the social context in which this consumption takes place. The young drug user is portrayed as separate and divorced from his or her social setting and their social identities have become subsumed by the substance. They are defined solely as drug users, and this over-arching identity becomes the individual's defining characteristic. Wagner calls this tendency to categorize individuals solely by their drug behavior a process of "de-contextualization of isolated behaviors" (Wagner, 1997, p.69). De-contextualization is sometimes so thorough that it is difficult to uncover how these individuals behave in social settings, perceive their social lives or express their feelings and beliefs. Furthermore, because the pleasure discourse is underdeveloped within epidemiological research little attention has been focused on the social construction of pleasure. As O'Malley and Mugford have argued "pleasure is not defined the same way in all societal contexts, nor are all drugs seen as desirable and pleasurable by all people in all cultures at all times" (1991, p.51). Given the tendency of this literature both to downplay the importance of pleasure and de-contextualize the user, we will now examine an alternative literature which has focused more specifically on examining the social setting within which these young people consume ecstasy and experience fun. This literature explores the meanings that young people give to these experiences, and instead of adopting a problem perspective, it celebrates young people's enjoyment of the dance scene.

Focusing on Pleasure: An Alternative Perspective

The starting point for much of this alternative sociological and cultural studies literature has been the attempt to understand the rapid expansion of the electronic-music dance scene. Even though the specific focus of individual researchers has been diverse, they have all explored the experiences of young people within this leisure activity and sought to understand the pleasurable features of the contemporary dance scene. [4] For example, Redhead (1990), one of the earliest commentators on the scene, referred in his early work to the development of Acid House in the U.K. in the late 1980s as a "Dionysian" culture. Although in his later work on rave culture he argued that the "paradise regained" of the initial years may have turned into a

[3]While the existing research literature has emphasized dance events as primary settings for using club drugs, these drugs are not exclusively used at dance events. See also Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Greer & Tolbert, 1998; Pedersen & Skrondal, 1999.

[4]One exception to this would be the work of Thornton (1996) who focused less on the internal happenings of the clubs themselves and more on the extent to which rave culture could be characterized as a sub-culture in the traditional sense.

"psychic malaise," he nevertheless believed that a central feature of rave culture was the pursuit of pleasure.

This focus on pleasure was further developed by writers such as Malbon (1999), who provided the first detailed account of the internal workings of the club scene and the night out. Malbon sought to show us the "lived, performed and emotional nature of clubbing" (1999, p.17). His interest was to explore how this pleasurable state, what he calls an "oceanic" or "ecstatic" experience, was achieved. Other studies, while focusing on different issues, have also emphasized elements of pleasure. For example, writers such as Bennett (2000) and Gilbert and Pearson (1999) have focused on the pleasure of the musical aspects of the scene, while others have concentrated on exploring the pleasurable elements of dancing (Thomas, 1997). Finally, because of the popularity of the dance scene for young women, feminist researchers have examined the relationship between gender and pleasure (Henderson, 1993; McRobbie, 1994; Pini, 2001) both from the perspective of young women and also, but to a lesser extent, from the perspective of young men.

Cultural studies research on raves and the dance scene provides an important counter-balance to the problem-focused approach of much of the drug literature. Given the sharp contrast between the foci of epidemiology and socio-cultural studies, it is not surprising that the implicit or even explicit conceptualizations of young people are also significantly different. These two approaches reflect a dichotomous view of young people based in part on different underlying theoretical paradigms of positivism and phenomenology. While epidemiological drug research portrays youthful drug use as particularly dangerous, and young people as especially vulnerable and in need of protection, researchers trained in cultural studies begin from the position that young people are "active and creative negotiators of the relationship between structure and agency" (Ettorre & Miles, 2002, p.173). They are viewed as actively involved in negotiating their lives and using "modes of consumption as a means of making sense of a rapidly changing world" (Ettorre & Miles, 2002, p.178).

Overall, socio-cultural studies have highlighted the pleasurable features of attending dance events, whether that be obtaining an ecstatic experience (Malbon, 1999), enjoying the music (Bennett, 2000), or exploring new boundaries of femininity (Pini, 2001). However, in spite of this emphasis on elements of pleasure and fun, these studies have considered the use of mind-altering substances largely as an adjunct to other issues. [5] While for example Malbon discusses the use of ecstasy and the extent to which it can provide "an additional layer of emotional and sensational action" (Malbon, 1999, p.116), his discussion of drugs is secondary to exploring other salient features, primarily the creation of a communal oneness.

In focusing on these features of raves and dance events, researchers have downplayed the extent to which using drugs may also be an important and even normalized part of young people's leisure activities and an essential contribution to their overall enjoyment of the night out. As Parker, Williams and Aldridge (2002) have argued, drug use among young people who attend dance events has become increasingly culturally acceptable and integrated into their leisure and lifestyle. The use of drugs that can bring about marked mood alterations and are themselves illicit pleasures may further "enhance the excitement" (O'Malley & Mugford, 1993, p.204) of the event. One of the key attractions of attending dance events and doing drugs is the possibility of being involved in an exciting and non-mundane activity.

[5]The one exception to this would be the work of Jackson (2004) who examines the pleasurable elements of the "clubbing" experience. His focus is on the body and the sensual and pleasurable experiences of clubbing.

Research Methods and Sample

Methods

The data used for this article come from an ongoing study on the San Francisco Bay Area electronic music dance scene and drug users. Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews. These interviews took place between February 2002 and August 2004 and were conducted by the project manager and five interviewers. In the first part of the interview, a brief, quantitative questionnaire was used to collect socio-demographic characteristics. For the rest of the interview, a semi-structured guide was used to collect primarily open-ended qualitative data on the respondents' backgrounds, their current lives, drug and alcohol use, and their involvement in the dance scene. Quantitative data on drug use were collected at the beginning of the drug use section, using frequency and quantity measures that were based on the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA, now called the National Survey on Drug Use and Health) and Monitoring the Future (Johnston et al., 2001; SAMHSA, 2001). The detailed interview guide and our respondents' desire to talk at length about their experiences and perspectives contributed to the lengthy nature of the interviews, which generally lasted between three and five hours. Respondents were given a $45 honorarium for their participation.

Respondents were recruited using several different methods, including advertisements, referrals from respondents, and through contacts of the project staff. Each potential respondent was screened and included if she or he had used at least one of the six National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) defined club drugs (ecstasy, LSD, methamphetamine, GHB, ketamine, Rohypnol) [6] and were involved in the electronic music dance scene in the San Francisco Bay Area. Involvement in the scene was defined as attending dance events such as clubs, raves, and warehouse parties. As this was primarily an exploratory study, we were interested in interviewing people with a wide range of experiences with club drugs, including both new and experienced users, as well as those who had used in the past but were not currently using.

Sample Characteristics and Drug Use

Of the 300 respondents interviewed in the study, 276 (92.0%) had used ecstasy at some point in their lives. The data presented here are for those 276 respondents, who we will be discussed in this paper.

Among the 276 ecstasy users in the sample, 47.5% were women and 52.5% were men (see Table 1). The sample was fairly young, with a median age of 20, and the majority of these respondents (70.6%) were between the ages of 18 and 24. Slightly more than half of the respondents reported Caucasian as their primary ethnic group (51.1%), while 23.9% reported Asian American, 12.0% reported Latino, 4.3% reported African American, and 2.9% reported another ethnic group (Pacific Islander, Native American, or Iranian). Just under six percent identified solely as "mixed." The vast majority of the respondents (87.0%) were born in the U.S. (65.2% in California).

Overall the sample was well-educated, and 53.6% of the respondents were attending some form of educational institution at the time of the interview. Just over 61% of the sample had graduated high school or received an equivalency degree, while 22.6% had received a college or other post-secondary degree. Forty-one percent of the sample had either received a four-year degree or were currently attending a four-year university. Only 13 respondents had not finished high school and were not currently pursuing a diploma or degree. Just over sixty percent of the sample were employed at the time of the interview, mostly in white-collar business or clerical jobs, education or non-profit fields, or in retail and service. Just over 38% of the respondents

[6] A small sample of non-club drug users were also interviewed

were unemployed, however, sixty-one percent of those not working were full-time students. Only five respondents had children (one child each) and one respondent was pregnant.

Since the goal of the project was to interview club drug users who attend dance events, and in our advertisements we noted that drug use was a focus of the study, it is therefore not surprising that the vast majority of people who participated in the project had used ecstasy. Besides alcohol and marijuana, ecstasy was by far the most commonly used drug in our sample. While 99.3% and 97% of the overall sample had tried some form of alcohol or marijuana, respectively, 92% had tried ecstasy. Of the 276 respondents who had used ecstasy, 239 (86.6%) had used in the year prior to being interviewed, 101 (36.6%) had used in the previous month, and 33 (12.0%) had used in the past week. Eighty percent of the past-month ecstasy users reported using on only one or two occasions in that period, which suggests a picture of primarily occasional or "weekend," rather than frequent use. This is not to say that some respondents had not experienced periods of heavy use, but for many of these respondents periods of heavy use were of short or moderate duration after which they either stopped or significantly reduced their consumption. The median age for first using ecstasy was 18, with a range of 12–36 years of age.

Having Fun and Finding Pleasure

An important and not surprising feature to emerge from the respondents' accounts of ecstasy is the extent to which having fun is a central component. Time and again respondents, when asked what they enjoy about using ecstasy, utilized the word 'fun' to describe their experiences: "To me E is like the funnest drug. It's the funnest. It's so much fun. And like the high was great." (046). The importance of having fun is not surprising given both the significance of attending dance events for many young people as a valued leisure activity as well as the extent of ecstasy use at dance parties. The respondents frequently described how ecstasy, especially when used within the dance-event setting, allowed them not just to have a good time but to experience a superlative level of fun. The element of fun is therefore a central feature of these respondents' discussions of pleasure, and within their narratives having fun is an integral part of the other more specific effects and benefits outlined below. In addition to the general feature of fun, the respondents' descriptions on pleasure and ecstasy can be divided into two general types: those that focus on the immediate effects while under the influence and those that emphasize more long term pleasurable benefits.

Immediate Effects - Transforming the Everyday

Although respondents did describe negative experiences and effects from ecstasy, [7] the majority characterized their experiences as largely pleasurable and positive. For some, the pleasures centered solely around enjoying an exciting night out, while for others the pleasures experienced were life-changing. Respondents described how they perceived themselves, experienced the environments in which they used, and related to others, highlighting the *extraordinary* or transcendental nature of the experience (Lyng, 1990). As O'Malley and Mugford have noted "in such a cultural milieu…. illicit and even dangerous drug taking as a leisure activity appears as an intelligible form of the normatively sanctioned search for the extraordinary" (1991, p.57). Ecstasy changed the ordinary and the familiar into something that was 'out-of-the-ordinary.' It operated not only to disrupt or "break the routine" of life (Cohen & Taylor, 1992, p.45), but also to transform mundane activities and interactions into ones that were deeply pleasurable, satisfying and exciting. [8] Going beyond the everyday, or "alterity" as Malbon (1999) calls it, removed the ecstasy user "from the 'normal' times, spaces and social

[7]For a further discussion of these negative effects see Hunt, Evans and Kares, (2007).

[8]However, it is also important to note that some researchers have suggested that taking ecstasy and attending dance events may gradually become routinized themselves and hence predictable and mundane. See for example Reith (2005) and Shewan, Dalgarno & Reith (2000).

relations of their everyday lives" (Malbon, 1999, p.83). Transforming the everyday, "transgressing boundaries," and inspiring "pleasure, excitement, exhilaration and desire" (Lupton, 1999, p.167) were central and fundamental features of ecstasy's appeal:

> So the first time…and every time, you're a kid in the candy store. But the first time, you're just going crazy. You just want…you have so much energy and just like…it's like a new…it's just brand new. It's a whole other way of looking at the world and seeing people and stuff. (041)

For this respondent, ecstasy use is energizing, novel, and radically transformative of their outlook on the world. In citing ecstasy's transformative capacity, the pleasures of ecstasy go beyond mere "fun" to something else. The descriptions of the pleasurable aspects of their ecstasy experiences can, for the purposes of this paper, be divided into three distinct but inter-related and often overlapping components - the physical experience, the emotional experience, and the experience of sociability and interacting with others.

The Physical Experience—An increase in energy and a heightening of the senses were the primary physical effects of the ecstasy high as described by the respondents. The pleasures of these physical effects were often tied to the social context within which they used the drug. For example, because many respondents used ecstasy at dance events, they noted a connection between the drug and their enjoyment of music and dancing. Many ecstasy respondents were able to enjoy music and dancing even more than they normally did, because the music sounded "better" or they could "feel" the music, and they could dance for longer periods:

> When you're listening to the music, it's not like you're just listening to it, like you can feel the pulsations of the bass or the drum, and it's not just something that you're there listening to, it's like you're feeling it. It sounds weird but…And the people around you are feeling it too, and it's just such a vibe of positivity. (219)

Here ecstasy transformed the physical experience of the music and the fact that this effect was shared by others further intensified the pleasure of the experience. Respondents also described the pleasures of visual effects and their sense of touch while on ecstasy. This heightened sense of touch made physical contact with others more pleasurable, as one respondent says, "I was just sitting against the wall with my girlfriend laying against me …. It felt so good. It feels good to have human contact. Like…you feel a warmth. Not just from physical but also like… you feel…emotionally warm" (182). Again the physical pleasures of the drug are intimately connected with its social aspects. Overall, these physical effects allowed young people to experience their environment in new and exciting ways. Experiencing these physical and sensual pleasures offers, according to Jackson (2004) "an alternative collective social order where people are granted access to explore sensual indulgences" (O'Brien, 2004, p.596) and shake off their "constricted, urbanized body" (Jackson, 2004, p.167).

The Emotional Experience—Many of the pleasurable effects of the ecstasy high had to do with its impact on the respondents' emotional state and their sense of well-being. Respondents enjoyed their ecstasy experiences because they felt "good," "happy" and "relaxed." As one respondent remarked, "It makes you feel very, very, very, very, very good." (182). Another said that ecstasy feels "like happiness that's about to like explode out of you" (023). Some even described their state of mind as "blissful" (221). This sense of increased well-being allowed respondents some respite from everyday worries and allowed them to focus on enjoying themselves and being present in the moment:

> When I was on E, it was just great, everything was great. Life's great, da, da, da, you know. It's just like…you had no cares in the world. Time was time at the moment you're in. Don't worry about tomorrow. That's the way it was for me, when I was on it at the parties. (021)

In addition to this sense of well-being, respondents also described feeling a sense of freedom that allowed them to behave in a less self-conscious or self-critical way. They felt free to act openly and authentically, to dance without worrying about whether they were 'good,' and to generally express themselves without fearing what others might think:

> You like…you open up to people. Like…I mean…I don't know. Like you don't feel like threatened by anybody, there's no like…worrying about trying to be something you're not. Like you can just open up and talk about whatever you want and…dance and…do anything you want. It's like…I don't know, it's just…a really great feeling. (085)

In this interview and in others, respondents emphasize the way that ecstasy facilitates not so much a transformation into someone or something new, but rather ecstasy enables them to finally be and act as they really are, unfettered from the artifice of everyday life. Ecstasy's impact on people's physical and emotional state, its enhanced sociability, combined with a meaningful social context, fostered interactions with others that made users feel the benefits of ecstasy were beyond simple physical and mental effects.

Interacting with Others—Ecstasy transformed the respondents' connections with others by altering the norms and expectations of everyday social behavior. The social constraints and barriers that existed in everyday social interactions, for example being too emotional or too open, were suddenly lifted by the effects of ecstasy, which made people feel much more sociable and empathetic:

> [It]..gave me a perception of like…there's people all like…you know, there's certain definite things that everybody responds to from being human and like…you know, ecstasy basically allows you to like overcome a lot of…weird stupid social barriers that like…might exist in a person. And it helped me to like overcome…those barriers when dealing with other people. (206)

This respondent experiences ecstasy as enabling not just superficial effects on sociability but a deeper dismantling of social barriers. Ecstasy can produce, as Jackson has noted "a temporary and partial dip in the feeling of fear and anxiety, which suffuse much of our social experiences" (2004, p.64). As one respondent noted, "it removes the fear factor …. You know, you still know your boundaries …. you still know when there's some things that you just shouldn't say. But you're not afraid to say some things" (017). Because norms of appropriate social and personal behavior and notions of privacy were transformed, people often became much more eager to interact with others and willing to share their personal thoughts and feelings. This openness in turn led respondents not only to bond more closely with friends and partners but produced in them an eagerness to meet new people. Respondents, who described themselves as normally shy, told of how they became more outgoing and their uneasiness about talking to strangers diminished:

> Because it kind of like lets the guard down and let's people…it makes people feel so happy and so like love, that people come together and like hug and talk, and like want to listen and like know you, how you feel. And …. that would never happen in a normal circumstance. There's definitely a lot of like meeting new people and talking to new people …. And like new people you meet, you're like "you're my best new friend." And like you feel like they are, you know. You don't feel like…you don't feel like hesitant or sketchy towards people. Like you're just really like open to like meeting new people. (214)

The use of the word "love" in this and in so many of the interviews should not be underestimated or dismissed. It reflects for many of the respondents the deepness of the feelings that they experienced while on ecstasy with others. Respondents talked about trusting others who were

on ecstasy and feeling closer to 'strangers.' They described experiencing feelings of love or a sense of "being loving" towards both friends or partners and others in general. Feeling closer with friends and being able to easily meet and connect with strangers, and thus transforming the 'normal' boundaries of social relationships, is something that many respondents feel is one of the most important benefits of ecstasy. Overall many respondents indicated feeling free of the constraints and pressures of everyday interactions and hence they valued these opportunities, even if, as many noted, it was drug-induced.

This change in notions of social boundaries also resulted in a diminution in the perception of social distance between people, which normally operated in day to day life. Spencer describes this process as "the abolition of difference and the creation of a sense of 'communion'" (1985, p.154 cited in Malbon, 1999). Respondents described how they became more accepting of others and less judgmental while on ecstasy. They became more open to sharing and finding connections with others who seemed, at least on the surface, to be very different:

> Everybody…you just feel like so much love toward people. You kinda like…all your barriers and…discriminations, prejudices, everything just goes away, like everybody's equal, and it feels really good, it feels…I don't even know. Like words can't even really explain it, it just feels amazing. (226)

While some respondents argued that these connections with strangers were fleeting and superficial, and limited to the context in which they occurred, others noted that these experiences were enjoyable and beneficial regardless of their ephemeral nature. As the same respondent above said, "I'd rather like live knowing like how great people can be in certain situations, even though it's like drug-related, you know. I think it's amazing like knowing how people can be" (226).

In the context of a dance event or party where others were also using ecstasy, respondents felt a freedom of social interaction often missing in their normal lives. Of course the setting of the dance event as the context within which this interaction took place, coupled with the use of ecstasy, was significant in creating these experiences. As Jackson notes, in many ways "ecstasy is the direct antidote to the sense of underlying anxiety that infects urban life. It allows you to experience the crowds …. in a very different way. Certainly part of this encounter arises from the social rules that surround much of clubbing, but ecstasy allows you to experience those rules fully" (Jackson, 2004, p.66).

Using ecstasy in an environment where others were also using, coupled with the agreed-upon social norms of the event, respondents set out to participate in a new and exciting shared experience - a sense of "being-together" (Malbon, 1999, p.73). An essential part of the pleasure experienced by respondents within this setting was knowing that others were 'on the same level,' and therefore would reciprocate this behavior:

> (I) What was great about it at a rave? That's like the place you like to do it.(R) Because like it was just everybody was in your same boat. It wasn't like you were the only one on the drug …. So it was like everybody feels what you're feeling. So everybody's so happy and it's just like all around. You know, like it's just like everybody's there on your same level. They're all like on a drug and like all feeling the same way and all feeling like this energy. (214)

Respondents found satisfaction, comfort and a sense of belonging in knowing that others were sharing in and being committed to the same pleasurable experience. Thus, in addition to their individual pleasures, they also found pleasure from feeling and knowing that they were part of a collective. This sense of collectivity has been noted by other researchers who have emphasized the pleasurable nature of merging with others. For example, Lupton, in discussing risk and pleasure, uses the Durkheimian concept of "collective effervescence" to describe such

group experiences, in which "participants may lose a sense of their autonomous selves, becoming, at least for a brief time, part of a mass of bodies/selves with a common shared purpose" (1999, p.153). [9] This sense of commonality is reflected by the following respondent:

> I remember there was a time when…I don't even know what songs were playing, but it was like really good. And…along with the lights and I just…felt like really peaceful and calm and everything, and then…the feeling of being connected to everybody around me, 'cuz everybody else was feeling it too, like I looked around…. The DJ put on like a really good track, and then everybody…like right when they hear the first beats they all cheered …. we were all…like I felt really connected to everybody. And then just that with the whole atmosphere and…the music and light shows and like…it felt like really moving, like I…I almost started crying, because it felt so good. You know, and…nothing else could…could evoke that feeling like ecstasy. (276)

This respondent describes a profound shared pleasure and an intense human connection unattainable without the aid of ecstasy. This pleasure of shared collectivity, unity and commonality in which "the everyday is disrupted, the mundane is forgotten and the ecstatic becomes possible" (Malbon, 1999, p.164) was, according to many respondents, another important reason for using ecstasy at dance events.

Enduring Effects - Transcending the Experience

In reflecting on their experiences of using ecstasy, all respondents discussed the transitory and immediate effects, however, some also described more enduring and even permanent benefits. [10] Longer-term positive effects produced changes both in their sense of themselves and in their subsequent social behavior and interactions with others.

As noted above, respondents described how ecstasy facilitated the transformation of everyday experiences and accepted norms of behavior in ways that they felt were self-revealing and enlightening. While some respondents believed that these effects were ephemeral and confined to the intoxicating influence of ecstasy, others sought to capitalize on the experience of the drug and integrate these newfound sentiments and ways of relating to others into their everyday lives. The pleasures of ecstasy thus contribute to a longer-lasting positive experience. Having experienced feelings of empathy and self-contentment, and becoming aware of previously unexplored means of relating to others and the world in general, respondents believed that they could re-create some of these positive and pleasurable ways of being into daily life. As one respondent noted:

> I think the way to come down is to just to take pause. Like to go outside and like take pause, "yes, I'm coming back to the real world, but that doesn't mean it's over." Like try to…it's kind of…it's spiritual in the fact that like everyone's like take God with you in your everyday life. Like you can do the same thing with E, like take back the feeling you had, the compassion, the empathy, all that stuff, take it back to the world …. So the best way to come down is to be able to remember what you learned, write it down, do whatever you can to remember what happened and be able to remember it and take it back to like your real life. (041)

This respondent was not alone in attributing to the pleasures of ecstasy a spirituality and she highlighted a view shared by others, that elements of the ecstasy experience could be captured and transferred into their everyday 'selves'. While we are not suggesting that respondents were suddenly transformed and became happy and empathetic all the time, they nevertheless

[9] This idea has also been examined by Maffesoli (1996) who developed the notion of neo-tribes.

[10] This division based on short term versus long term effects has been noted by other researchers. For example, Beck & Rosenbaum (1994) examined the extent to which different types of ecstasy users (therapeutically or recreationally-oriented) would emphasize short term versus longer term effects.

believed that the insights and benefits gained from taking ecstasy could be incorporated into their day-to-day lives. The 'drug-self' could be merged with and bring pleasure to the 'everyday self.'

For those respondents who held this belief, ecstasy served as a catalyst for creating new possibilities in how they perceived and related to themselves and the world around them. The experience on ecstasy and the opportunity to experience life and interactions with others outside of everyday norms and expectations uncovered a way of being that respondents had previously not experienced or had not been aware of, but which they found pleasing and preferable. Respondents described how ecstasy had "opened" them up to an altered consciousness and they now found themselves having a 'new perspective' on life. As one respondent describes, "it gave me a way of being able to feel, like whether it's like calm or open, or loving. It's like, to me, that's an opening up of a certain kind of consciousness" (195). For some respondents this new perspective was at the level of how they related to others or their outlook on life, while for others this took on a metaphysical/spiritual undertone in which ecstasy was seen to have opened them to understanding a greater purpose or meaning in life.[11]

> There had never been anything esoteric in my life …. it [ecstasy] allowed me to have esoteric experiences which allowed me to reflect different on…how my life…is. And then also kind of…there's that idea that you get a glimpse of…not like divination, more like…you're given opportunities to see different ways of seeing things. And I think…having those opportunities has been…what has been life-changing …. when you take something like ecstasy you're just like, holy shit …. You know, there's like the spectrum of the rainbow …. You've been doing your couple of routes that work for you, and all of a sudden there's this, there's a rainbow…of interaction and experience and…like…You know, what do you do with something like that? It's life changing. And it was for me and I know for a lot of people, a lot of friends, it has been. (179)

The new 'consciousness' that some respondents described and ecstasy's ability to be life changing, was often tied to a process of self-discovery. Transcending the mundane and escaping the routine of everyday life provides people with a sense of personal autonomy, self-discovery and self-actualization (Lyng, 2005; O'Malley & Mugford, 1993). While most respondents had not used ecstasy with the deliberate intention of promoting self-change, nevertheless many did describe how ecstasy ultimately induced a shift in how they perceived themselves. As Reith has noted, drug users may leave their "everyday personas behind" (2005, p.237). This, according to Lyng "leaves them with a purified and magnified sense of self" (Lyng, 1990, p.860). Respondents believed that the positive and valued attributes of the self while intoxicated could be used to improve the everyday self: [12]

Having experienced a level of self-acceptance and openness with others while under the influence of ecstasy, and realizing the pleasurable and beneficial nature of this, respondents tried to simulate and re-enact these feelings in their everyday lives:

> (R) my use of MDMA was…really like…pivotal in me becoming who I am now, which is like…a lot more adjusted …. I really feel like I've been able to open up and like…be more okay with who
>
> I am.
>
> (I) And do you feel like when you're not on ecstasy you maintain that ability?

[11]Feeling that one now understands the meaning of life is not unusual for drug users. For example Coleridge, De Quincy and Huxley all described similar effects for mind altering drugs (Boon, 2002; De Quincy, 1971; Huxley, 1954).

[12]Some researchers have referred to this process of self-improvement as ego-work. See Reith (2005).

(R) Absolutely. (246)

Respondents described that an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem were some of the most important effects that ecstasy had on their personal development. Many respondents described that while under the influence of ecstasy they worried less about what others thought of them and generally felt more accepting of and confident in themselves. For example, one respondent described how he had been more introverted in the past: "I was more…introverted, not quite as social. Now in everyday life I'm much more outgoing and…confident and…yes, very confident" (182). They described how they had come to realize that their insecurities were related to their self-perceptions, and having once experienced a readjustment of these perceptions while on ecstasy, they began to work towards regaining that sense of self-confidence in their everyday personas. Becoming more outgoing and sociable were said to be some of the benefits of this new perception, especially for those respondents who felt they struggled with shyness: "E broke the ice …. probably to this day, if I never did E at a party, I would probably still be antisocial and probably wouldn't even go to parties. But now that I've experienced the drug side…I like the sober side now" (086).

Respondents realized, on the basis of their ecstasy experiences, that new and more positive ways of interacting with others were both possible and desirable. Having now experienced the pleasures of being more sociable and open with both friends and strangers while on ecstasy, some of these respondents then sought to translate these experiences into their everyday interactions and consequently they described how they now found it easier to meet and talk to people. As one respondent remarked:

> You feel like this deep connection to like everyone around you. And it changes the way you look at like interactions with other people. You become like…I always tell them like, "Yeah, I think ecstasy has made me a much more extroverted person than before." I think…I don't know, like I tell 'em, I think it changed my life. I think I'm a new person because of it …. I used to be like pretty shy and like, you know, not really like…feel like uncomfortable like in social situations. But like…I don't know, ever since I started taking ecstasy I've become like…like I said, I've become much more extroverted. Like it's really not hard for me to like talk to people. Like to just go up and talk to anybody, and just communicate with people. (129)

Overall these respondents believed that their experiences with ecstasy had brought about beneficial changes in their normal lives. In these cases, ecstasy was portrayed as a tool that had facilitated changes which potentially had long term benefits, as one respondent noted, "it made me have a more positive outlook on life" (128). Such changes were especially welcomed by some respondents, for whom the ecstasy experience represented aspects of themselves or their lives they had already hoped to manifest. Fortuitously, ecstasy had, at least in part, provided them with the impetus and opportunity to initiate such changes.

Conclusion

For the purposes of this paper we have concentrated on the respondents' discussions of the pleasures of using ecstasy. Though we made reference to the dance scene as an important element in experiencing the pleasures and benefits, much of our discussion did concentrate on the use of ecstasy largely in isolation of the multiple social contexts in which respondents used it. Consuming ecstasy is primarily a social activity done with friends, and as we have noted in our discussion, the enjoyment of the experience is connected to the music, the dancing, the light shows and being with other users. The pleasures of using ecstasy are embedded within this wider context and cannot be easily or accurately divorced from the enjoyment of these other elements of the experience. Therefore, while we hope this paper served its purpose in highlighting the users' perspectives on the pleasures of ecstasy use, we do not wish to ignore

the extent to which ecstasy and the dance scene are integrally interwoven. We must underscore the point that to fully understand the meaning of drug use in the lives of the users, it must be contextualized.

In exploring the meanings of ecstasy use we have attempted to correct a research imbalance which has concentrated on the dangers and ignored the pleasures. We believe it is important to examine the pleasures associated with drug use and dance events in order to understand why young people use illicit drugs and why they seek out the excitement of the rave and club scene as liminal zones "where the impermissible" (O'Malley & Mugford, 1994, p.210) is valued and pursued. However, it is not our intention to give the impression that youthful drug use occurs without any problems or that the respondents are not aware of the potential risks involved in consuming illicit drugs. While our data certainly highlighted the enjoyable and positive nature of ecstasy use, it is also the case that some respondents described negative or unpleasant effects. In fact, as we have discussed in detail elsewhere (Hunt, et al., 2007) these respondents were not only well aware of the potential dangers associated with using ecstasy, but also took proactive steps to minimize the risks of using.

Despite these risks, most respondents believed that using ecstasy was ultimately a positive decision. While for some the importance lay solely in the ability to have fun, others valued ecstasy because it allowed them a glimpse at an alternative way of being and interacting with others. The possibility of viewing the world differently and interacting with others in a more meaningful way may reflect, as some commentators would have us believe, the alienated state of modern youth, often referred to as Generation Y or the lost generation. [13] However, other researchers have suggested that the desire to transcend the mundane is not specific to young people but instead reflects a more general tendency within post-industrial societies where individuals in general seek out "emotionally exciting activities, including leisure activities …. to offset the suffocation of an overcontrolled, alienated existence within the mundane reality of modern life" (O'Malley & Mugford, 1993, p.206). The accuracy of either contention is difficult to assess and certainly outside the scope of this paper. We can only suggest that at least for some respondents the experience of using ecstasy was so significant that they wished to re-create the experience in their everyday lives.

Discussions of youthful drug use have been largely determined by adults who have emphasized the potential dangers of using drugs, while the meanings that young people themselves give to their drug use have been explored less frequently. While contemporary drug research on ecstasy has emphasized the dangers, young people also emphasize the pleasures, the benefits and the fun. Although the absence of a pleasure perspective within the drug field is not surprising, its omission may have serious consequences, especially in prevention and harm-reduction efforts. Contemporary prevention messages which solely emphasize the dangers of ecstasy, and erroneously claim that "club drugs aren't fun drugs," have little chance of resonating with the lived experiences of young drug users. If our sample of users is any indication, it is only too obvious that public health messages which fail to acknowledge the enjoyable and beneficial aspects of ecstasy use will be viewed with doubt and suspicion by many young users. Consequently, if prevention or harm reduction efforts are to be effective, they need to include some recognition of the potential pleasures of consuming ecstasy, and respect for the opinions of users who feel that it is a 'life-changing' experience.

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[13]For a fuller discussion see Campbell (2004) and Ortner (1998).

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Table 1
Sample Characteristics (N=276)

	Number	%
Gender		
Female	131	47.5
Male	145	52.5
Age		
15–17	27	9.8
18–24	195	70.6
25–47	54	19.6
Primary Ethnicity		
Caucasian	141	51.1
Asian American	66	23.9
Latino/Hispanic	33	12.0
African American	12	4.3
Other	8	2.9
Mixed	16	5.8
Education Level		
No Diploma and Not a Current Student	13	4.7
No Diploma and Current High School or Equivalency Student	30	10.9
High School Diploma or Equivalency	169	61.2
2-year College Degree	10	3.6
4-year College Degree	49	17.8
M.A. or Ph.D.	3	1.1
Other	2	0.7
Primary Employment		
Professional, Business and Clerical	84	30.4
Retail and Personal Service	65	23.6
Skilled and Unskilled Labor	16	5.8
Other	6	2.2
Unemployed or Does Not Work	105	38.0