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EPIDEMIOLOGY MEETS CULTURAL STUDIES: STUDYING AND UNDERSTANDING YOUTH CULTURES, CLUBS AND DRUGS

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INTRODUCTION

The use of ecstasy (MDMA) and other club drugs¹ has increased dramatically in the United States since 1998 and with this has grown an escalation in concern and interest in their use. While the upsurge in use may be attributed to a number of different factors, a strong association exists between ecstasy use and the popularity and increasing prevalence of dance events, particularly raves, clubs, and dance parties. Although the peak of raves may be past (arguably, raves peaked in 1994 in the UK and a bit later in 2002 in the U.S.), youth nightlife and the dance scene continues, ecstasy use among youth may be on the rise (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2007), and attempts to control and regulate youth cultures continue.

A cursory look at the public perceptions of clubs and drugs reveals the existence of two opposing and contrasting perspectives or discourses. One, an official discourse, characterizes raves, dance events and taking drugs as spaces of “excess risk” (Moore & Valverde, 2000, p. 528), which need to be controlled and regulated. An indicator of the extent of the concern and the desire for regulation was the passing in 2003 of the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act, previously named the “RAVE Act” in the U.S. In attempting to close down raves, here the establishment revealed “a trenchant fear of youth transcendence - as authorities, suspicious of bodily pleasure, conflate dance with moral corruption” (St John, 2004, p. 5). The other discourse, as exemplified in accounts of the participants themselves and sometimes referred to as “subjugated knowledges” (Moore, In press), emphasizes the importance of dance events and club drugs for young people and the pleasures derived from attending and using. The dichotomous nature of the discourses – an official, expert and governmental response to raves and the techno dance scene on the one hand, and the insider perspectives of the youthful participants on the other – is not altogether surprising; adult concerns with and attempts to control youthful practices have been witnessed many times before (Griffin, 1993) and today we may be seeing an increasing “governance of youth” (Bunton, Green, & Mitchell, 2004, p. 8).

A division between perspectives on and approaches to understanding raves and drug use, though, can be found not just in the contrast between official/government approaches and those of rave/dance club participants, but also within scholarly work. Scholarship on raves, the dance scenes, and club drugs can be divided into two immensely differing traditions: epidemiological and cultural-studies approaches. The epidemiological research² has focused primarily on examining the prevalence of club drugs, the problems associated with their use and the characteristics of the users. The cultural studies approach acts as a much-needed corrective or

¹The National Institute on Drug Abuse's (NIDA) classification includes under the heading “club drugs” the following individual substances: ecstasy, LSD, methamphetamine, GHB, ketamine, Rohypnol. This, however, does not necessarily completely match the experiences of drug-using club goers. Our own research, for example, has found that other substances, including cocaine, poppers and magic mushrooms, are popular within the club scene.

supplement to the epidemiological research through its introduction of a focus on pleasure, subjectivity, and social context and by more fully attending to youth perspectives. However, the cultural studies scholarship, itself, has important blind spots, particularly in its underemphasis on the role of drugs within the dance and rave scenes. We will argue for a third approach that utilizes the theoretical and methodological strengths of the cultural studies approach, while combining it with perspectives that allow us to comprehend the role that drugs play within these scenes and the roles of pleasure and risk within them.

RESEARCH DICHOTOMIES

1. Contemporary ecstasy and club drug research

The overall aim of the available epidemiological research in charting drug use and the dance scene has been to assess the prevalence of drug use and “risk factors for addiction, psychological problems which might be treated, or a general and dangerous propensity for antisocial behaviour” (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, p. 3). More specifically the extant research has emphasized: the problems of using ecstasy and other club drugs; the extent of drug using behaviors connected with the scene; and the characteristics of the users.

i. The problems of using ecstasy and other club drugs—First, researchers have examined the potential problems of using ecstasy (MDMA) and other club drugs. For example in the case of ecstasy, a number of physical and psychological problems have been associated with its use. MDMA can cause psychological problems such as depression, sleep problems, anxiety, and paranoia and the stimulant effects of MDMA may lead to a significant increase in heart rate and blood pressure, dehydration, hyperthermia, or possible seizures and heart or kidney failure (Dowling, 1990; Milroy, 1999; NIDA, 1999). Possible long-term brain damage has also been identified (Asghar & DeSouza, 1989; McCann, Szabo, Scheffel, Dannals, & Ricaurte, 1998; 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). Other serious reactions include “hyperthermia, rhabdomyolysis, disseminated intravascular coagulation, renal failure, cardiac complications intracranial hemorrhage and hepatotoxicity” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 1212. See also Goss, 2001; Smith, Larive, & Romanelli, 2002).

ii. The extent of drug-using behaviors connected with the scene—As many researchers in Australia, Canada, Germany and the U.K. have documented, a strong association exists between the dance scene and specific types of drugs, especially ecstasy and methamphetamines (Adlaf & Smart, 1997; Boys, Lenton, & Norcross, 1997; Deehan & Saville, 2003; Forsyth, 1996a; Lenton, Boys, & Norcross, 1997; Measham, Aldridge, & Parker, 2001; Soellner, 2005). As Measham and her colleagues (2001) note, “the key conclusion to be drawn ... is that clubbers are extremely drug-experienced” (p. 96). Not only did researchers discover that the majority of attendees use drugs at raves and clubs (Boys et al., 1997; Ward & Fitch, 1998; Akram & Galt, 1999), but also that attendees had a much higher rate of using drugs than non-attendees (Adlaf & Smart, 1997; Measham et al., 2001; Tossman, Boldt, & Tensil, 2001, p. 12). Overall, these studies suggest a strong association between dance events and drug use and most researchers have argued that increases in the use of club drugs by young adults reflect their increasing involvement in dance events.

²Although not all epidemiologists work within the social problems emphasis, for the purposes of this article we focus on those within the epidemiological tradition that appear most central in the club-drugs literature. We must note, though, that some epidemiologists would argue that the frequency of equating drug use with drug abuse is not an inherent tendency of epidemiology, but rather a misuse of it (Duncan, 1997; Terris, 1987, 1990, 1992).

Epidemiologists have identified ecstasy as the quintessential drug of the international rave and club scenes. Lenton, Boys, and Norcross (1997) in Australia discovered that ecstasy was the only drug which was used by more respondents in association with a rave than in any other setting (for similar findings in Britain see Ward & Fitch, 1998 and Pearson, Ditton, Newcombe, & Gilman, 1991) and ecstasy rates among ravers and clubgoers are much higher than among youth in the general population (Tossman, Boldt, & Tensil, 2001, p. 12). It is not solely ecstasy, though, that epidemiologists have found prevalent in the dance scenes. Research suggests that marijuana may be used more extensively than ecstasy (see for example Tossman et al., 2001), especially in the stages before and after the event, and high rates of amphetamine- and hallucinogen-use have also been documented (Van de Wijngaart, Braam, de Bruin, & Fris, 1999; Ward & Fitch, 1998).

iii. Characteristics of the users: age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality—The age of the users is the first striking and somewhat obvious characteristic. The majority of attendees at dance events are teenagers and young adults, both male and female. From the available research this trend appears generally consistent in different countries, and ecstasy users who attend raves and clubs have some similar characteristics. For example, according to Measham and her colleagues, ravers in the North of England are predominantly young adults between the ages of 16–25 (Measham, Parker, & Aldridge, 1998). A number of other studies show that the age range is generally similar, although there may be slight variations in attendees' average age; studies range from a mean age of attendees of 18.9 in Australia to 24.8 in Berlin (Boys et al., 1997; Calafat et al., 2001).

The gender ratio of the users is the second striking feature to emerge from the research literature. Although no representative surveys have been completed on the gender ratio of attendees at clubs, raves, and parties, researchers have argued that while men dominate the scene, women are a significant presence. Most studies suggest that the ratio of young men to young women is never greater than 60/40.³ For example, the SONAR project (Calafat et al., 2001) showed an overall dominance of men (approximately 60%) but they also discovered that the precise gender ratios varied both from one city to another as well as within different scenes. (See also Solowij, Hall, & Lee, 1992).

The presence of women within the scene is also reflected in their drug-using behaviors. The fact that attendees at clubs and parties are “drug-experienced” is true for both young women and men. Researchers still tend to find greater male involvement in club drugs among adults (Measham et al., 2001, p. 101) but young women's use appears to be increasing, and “the once distinctive differences in the figures between boys and girls is disappearing, with young women being almost as likely to take drugs as young men” (Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998, p. 14).

In terms of ethnic characteristics, the research evidence from the national studies suggest that ecstasy users are primarily white. This predominance of white users and attendees has been noted both in the U.K. and in the U.S. For example, in the U.K. Measham and her colleagues (2001) in their sample of over 2000 club goers in Manchester found that only 5% were either Afro-Caribbean or Asian. In the U.S., Johnston and colleagues (2003), using data from the “Monitoring the Future” study, found that white high school seniors were nearly six times as likely to report ecstasy use in the past year as their African American counterparts and Yacoubian and Urbach (2004), analyzing data from the U.S. NHSDA survey between 1990 and 2001, found that “the use of ecstasy has remained primarily a white phenomenon” (2004, p. 75). However, there exists some recent local research that suggests that the ethnic composition of ecstasy users may either be altering or may be determined by geographical

³The one city that is an exception to this was Athens, where the rave scene was heavily dominated by men (80%).

location. For example, Schensul, Diamond, Disch, Bermudez, and Eiserman (2005) have highlighted the extent to which ecstasy has begun to diffuse to African American and Latino youth in inner urban areas and in some regions Asian Americans have become a significant presence within the rave and club scenes (Hunt, Evans, Wu, & Reyes, 2005).

Another body of research has developed in recent years focusing on sexuality and club drug use, centered particularly on analyses of drug use among men who have sex with men (MSM) in the gay club/party scenes. For example, studies have highlighted higher rates of marijuana, cocaine, and popper use (McKirnan & Peterson, 1989), and higher rates of methamphetamine and ketamine among homosexual vs. heterosexual drug-users in the dance/club scenes (Degenhardt, 2005). A particular focus of this research has centered on analysis of the connections between club-drug use (particularly methamphetamine use) and high risk sexual practices that can lead to HIV transmission. For example, Colfax et al. (2005) found higher rates of unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) when MSM were using methamphetamine, poppers, or cocaine; Operario et al. (2006) found significant increases in risky-sexual practices associated with frequent substance use, club drug use, and polydrug use among young MSM; and Celentano et al. (2005) found significant associations between incidents of UAI and being under the influence of alcohol, cocaine, amphetamines, and marijuana. The research on MSM drug use, which continues to grow, remains somewhat isolated from other club-drug research, with little relatively little cross-citation

2. What's missing from the drug literature?

As is clear from the above discussion, there exists an extensive epidemiological literature on the potential problems with using ecstasy and other drugs, the extent to which drugs are associated with the contemporary dance scene and the types, the characteristics of the users, and the patterns and combinations of drugs used. While this literature has been particularly important in providing information on the drug-using patterns and the socio-demographic characteristics of the users, it has nevertheless ignored three critically important features:

i. Agency—First, and most importantly, it has omitted any investigation of young people's perspective or understanding of their own behaviors (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987). "Concern with adolescent drug use.... are based on assumptions about the meaning of drugs for potential users whose perspectives are very different from that of adults" (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987, p. 1). The agency of young people is ignored or underemphasized and consequently the vast majority of research has neglected to consider the role or meaning of drugs within the lives of young people and especially their role within young people's leisure activities from the perspective of youth themselves. Young people within the literature are viewed as fundamentally passive, risky or problematic consumers involved in risky consumption (Mitchell, Bunton, & Green, 2004).

ii. Pleasure—Second, epidemiological research in focusing on the problematic nature of drug use has ignored the importance of pleasure in drug consumption.⁴ Within this research, primacy has been given to a discourse of pathology, deviancy and problems and "considerations of 'pleasure' in relation to drug use" (Moore, In press) have been marginalized. This neglect of pleasure and fun from much of the official drug discourse and drug research literature in general is particularly striking when we examine the use of ecstasy and other "club drugs." In spite of the fact that researchers have christened the clustering of drugs associated with night-time 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. These discourses "tend to remain

⁴In noting the emphasis in epidemiology on the problematic nature of drug use, we do not wish to give the impression that issues of pleasure have been completely absent in epidemiological research on drugs. See for example Terris, 1975.

silent about pleasure as a motive for consumption and raise instead visions of a consumption characterized by compulsion, pain and pathology. Problematic substance use is said to be caused not by pleasure-seeking but by such things as ... the 'behavioral stimuli' of many current psychological theories of 'craving' or by some bodily, social or psychological failing or deficit that pushes people to act 'unreasonably'" (O'Malley & Valverde, 2004, p. 26). The absence of any significant discourse about pleasure within drug research means that a central component of why both young people and adults use mind-altering substances is ignored. As Parker and his colleagues (1998) have remarked, "we need to place....pleasure in the formula. Drugs are used because they give enjoyment" (p. 133; see also Hunt and Evans, In press); this seemingly obvious point is missing from much epidemiological drug research. Unfortunately because drug research focuses solely on the substances themselves and their possible dangers, researchers miss completely the point that the enjoyment of taking these substances is an intrinsic part of enjoying the event which includes the music, the spectacle, the dancing and most importantly having fun with friends or lovers. 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 (1991) 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" (p. 51). Furthermore both the sensory effects of the drugs and the very nature of the pleasures engendered by them vary based on different contexts (Duff, 2007).

iii. Context—Finally, the epidemiological literature has also ignored the social context in which young people's drug use takes place. In focusing solely on the substance itself, researchers have downplayed the importance of studying the use of these substances within a social setting. The club/rave settings are noted (as locations of ecstasy use) but these settings are rarely examined or explored. Although Zinberg (1984) produced his classic study of drug settings over twenty years ago, few studies within the drug field have located youthful drug use within a socio-cultural context of consumption. Consuming ecstasy is primarily a social activity done with friends, either in a public environment such as a rave or in private at a party. However within the epidemiology literature, the young drug user is portrayed as separate and divorced from his or her social setting and their social identities have become totally subsumed by the substance. They are defined solely as drug users, and this over-arching identity becomes the individual's defining characteristic. Wagner (1997) calls this tendency to categorize individuals solely by their drug behavior a process of "de-contextualization of isolated behaviors" (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.

Therefore in order to begin to examine the social context of club drug consumption and the social construction of the pleasures associated with it, we must now turn our attention to examining an alternative literature which has focused more specifically on examining the socio-cultural setting within which these young people consume ecstasy and other drugs and experience fun. This literature explores the meanings that young people give to experiences at raves and clubs, and instead of adopting a problem perspective, it celebrates young people's active enjoyment of the dance scene. Within this literature, the neglected voices of young people are explored.

3. Focusing on young people, the dance scene and pleasure - a cultural studies perspective

Given both the wide-ranging nature of the available sociological and cultural studies research on youth cultures coupled with the ubiquity of the international dance scene (Hunt & Evans, 2003), it is not surprising that the literature is fragmented into different interest areas. While the available epidemiological literature has remained within fairly narrow research limits -

characteristics of users, drug patterns and problems - the topics covered by researchers who have examined the dance scene is extensive and covers such issues as gender relations, religious and trance experiences, musical taste, dance styles, changes in the urban nightlife, political protest and global developments. Moreover, while some researchers have focused exclusively on the experiences within the clubs themselves or the dance scene in general others have used the electronic music dance world to illustrate other wider sociological issues. (Bennett, 2000; Brewster & Broughton, 1999; Butler, 2006; Collin, 1997; Epstein, 1994; Fritz, 1999; Gilbert & Pearson, 1999; Harrison, 1998; Huq, 2006; Laughy, 2006; Maffesoli, 1996; Mitchell, 1996; Redhead, 1997; Reynolds, 1999; Silcott, 1999; Skelton & Valentine, 1998). Consequently given the extent of the existing literature, it is not possible for us to cover in-depth all the different strands within this paper. Instead rather than attempting to be fully comprehensive and review the entire literature of the field, we will focus in particular on some of the key cultural studies of the dance scene, which have been most central or influential in the field, as representative of trends observed more broadly.

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 in the 1990s. 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. 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 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 “psychic malaise,” he nevertheless believed that a central feature of rave culture was a pursuit of pleasure.

Epidemiology and cultural studies adopt significantly different research methodologies. Whereas epidemiological research on ecstasy and other club drugs has adopted, unsurprisingly, survey and quantitative methods, youth researchers today are committed to ethnographic and qualitative research. Unlike epidemiologists, who have remained separate from their research subjects in a quest for “objectivity,” cultural studies researchers have been more involved with their young respondents, documenting accounts of their own experiences and uncovering the processes of being young. Influenced by developments in new thinking in anthropological research and cultural and feminist studies, especially around issues of reflexivity, these researchers have reacted against the role of researcher as the “outside expert.” Instead they have emphasized the importance of doing “self-as-insider” research and many of the studies we will discuss have been written by young researchers who had been involved in the scene prior to conducting research on it (Malbon, 1999; Pini, 2001; Thornton, 1996; Wright, 1999).

i. Studying club cultures: finding cohesion within the club and dance scene— Within cultural studies research on the dance scene, two contrasting themes can be identified. Some analysts view the clubs and dance events or the night out as *overcoming or counteracting* the wider societal divisions while others examine the dance scene *as reflecting or reproducing* the social divisions within the wider society. In the former, researchers examine the elements of cohesion and in the latter, they focus on the divisive elements within the dance scene.

With the initial development of the rave scene first in Ibiza, Spain and then the U.K., commentators noted the extent to which young people from many different social backgrounds came together at the raves and bonded into one undifferentiated mass of humanity. “With rave, class, ethnicity, gender and other social distinctions were imagined to dissipate” (St John, 2004, p. 5). Young attendees described their experience of oneness, empathy and shared communality. This sense of oneness was reflected in some of the early sociological accounts

of raves and clubbing and especially in the work of Ben Malbon. His book *Clubbing* (1999) is still the most detailed account of the internal workings of the club scene and the night out. Malbon seeks to show us the cohesive nature of clubbing, or as Deleuze and Guattari have called it, a “Body without Organs” (Jordan, 1995). The experiences of the night out are viewed as primarily a harmonious environment in which young people from all backgrounds could come and blend together. In opposition to other research, he argues that previous research neglected the “experiences of clubbing itself” (Malbon, 1999, p. 17) by which he means the experiential interactions that take place on the dance floor. He believes that researchers such as Thornton (1996; discussed below) provide only a “background to.... the practices and spacing constituting clubbing” (1999, p. 18). Instead, Malbon (1999) seeks to convey the “lived, performed and emotional nature of clubbing” (p. 18). He asks: what are the meanings that young people experience while attending dance events? And to what extent do clubbers experience a togetherness which binds disparate groups of individuals together during the night-out? While he agrees with previous research that has emphasized the quality of resistance within youth cultures (a prominent theme in much of the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), he argues that an equally important feature, albeit a neglected one, is the desire by young people in coming together to belong. “The practices of youth cultures can be as much about *expression* as about resistance; as much about belonging as *excluding*; as much about temporarily *forgetting* who you are as about consolidating an identity ... and as much about blurring boundaries between people and cultures as affirming or reinforcing those boundaries” (Malbon, 1999, p. 19) (Author’s emphasis). By identifying with the crowd, clubbers confirm their identity.

His interest in the internal experiences of clubbing is also important for research on clubs and drug use because he seeks to examine the relationship between sociality and experiential consumption in terms of both the experience and the drugs. However his focus on drug use and specifically ecstasy does not emanate from an interest in drugs per se but more on the use of substances to achieve what he calls an “oceanic” or “ecstatic” experience – “losing and gaining control, feeling inside and outside the self, the momentary euphoria outside time and place” (Crichter, 2000, p. 159). By using these terms, Malbon wishes to convey the intensity and specificity of the experience enjoyed by club goers. According to Malbon the ecstatic experience comes from a combination of dancing and using the body within a crowd and merging with the music can be intensified or prolonged by the use of “dance” drugs and especially ecstasy. While arguing that an ecstatic experience can be obtained without the drugs, he nevertheless admits that using dance drugs, especially ecstasy, provides “an additional layer of emotional and sensational action” (Malbon, 1999, p. 116). At the height of the oceanic experience the individual loses all sense of time and place and experiences a sense of oneness or belonging with all the other participants.

The theme of unity and the creation of a “spontaneous communitas” (Turner, 1969) has been developed by other researchers who have focused on the development of “techno-communitas.” The most articulated form of this research can be found in the work of Graham St John and specifically his edited book *Rave, Culture and Religion* (2004). In general, he and the contributors to the collection seek to examine the religious or spiritual content of raves. What is it that participants experience when they attend a rave or dance party? Raving is viewed as a transformational and spiritual practice in which rave attendees experience a sense of transcendent community or “indissoluble bond” brought about by their willingness to let go of their identity. Within this “dissolution of identity” (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999), the participants experience a sense of intense pleasure. One of the first steps of abandoning one’s identity is through the process of dressing up - a process “of deconstructing and reconstructing subjectivity” (Gautier, 2004, p. 73). The disappearance of both one’s self and “the other” experienced by rave attendees is similar to the ecstatic and trance-like qualities found in shamanistic rituals in many parts of the world (Tramacchi, 2004) and is experienced by rave

participants in different cultures including the U.K. (Malbon, 1999), France (Gautier, 2004), Canada (Olaveson, 2004), San Francisco (Hill, 1999) and Ibiza and Goa (D'Andrea, 2007). From this disappearance of self, the individual participant becomes one with the rest of the attendees.

ii. Studying club cultures: elements of differentiation – gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity—Although a couple of important collected editions appeared prior to the publication of her book (such as Redhead, 1993), Sarah Thornton's study *Club Cultures* (1996) can be considered the first in-depth and probably most influential of all the later cultural studies research on the dance scene. Thornton's interest in the dance scene came out of a cultural studies perspective which sought to understand and deconstruct a significant example of popular youth culture. Her concern lay less in the internal and cohesive happenings of the clubs themselves and more about the way young people use taste cultures to distinguish themselves and their own social groupings from others both within and outside the scene. To do this she modifies Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital" and develops the concept of "subcultural capital," which like cultural capital acts to confer status on its owner. Individual club goers define themselves as authentic members of the rave subculture or the underground and in so doing they distinguish themselves from others who are less "cool," who they categorize as being part of the homogeneous and indiscriminate mainstream. In other words they provide themselves an identity by which and through which they can separate themselves from others.

Issues of gender do not loom large in Thornton's work and yet because of the popularity of the dance scene for young women, feminist researchers have examined gender issues and gender relationships (Henderson, 1993; Hutton, 2006; McRobbie, 1994; Pini, 2001) both from the perspective of young women themselves but also, to a lesser extent, from the perspective of young men. Other than a number of highly influential articles by McRobbie (1993; 1994), the most significant early study on women and the dance scene is Pini's *Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity*. Maria Pini has produced an important feminist account of the dance scene. She argues that left-wing scholarship had tended to neglect dance cultures, and especially disco, on the grounds that they were fundamentally trivial and hedonistic.⁵ Today, however, the world of dance cultures has "finally captured the academic left imagination" (Pini, 2001, p. 29). Nevertheless, according to Pini, this renewed interest has remained male centered and little research exists on women within the scene. With this in mind, Pini examines the recreational practices of young women in the dance world - a world which allows them, she argues, to live out a more liberating version of femininity.

Although Pini (2001) acknowledges the importance of Thornton's work, she argues that Thornton's study is indicative of research which has ignored issues of femininity and has focused too little attention on the "practices and experiences of women within these cultures" (p. 7). To counter this failure she asks why women consider raving so liberating. Pini answers this by analyzing the experiential accounts of women in the dance scene and she explores how these young women seek experiences of adventure, exploration, discovery and pleasure within the world of raves. She finds that the dance floor is a space for young women to explore the boundaries of "appropriate" behavior and that the rave scene has allowed women a new freedom in using drugs (though not a central concern, Pini focuses more on drug use in the scene than is typical in the cultural studies literature). Pini discovered that her respondents no longer saw drug taking as a form of personal pathology, but instead they attached a certain street credibility to getting high and looking "out of it." This freedom to consume drugs, have fun, and "go mad" within the dance scene is unusual, especially given the presence of men. In

⁵Baudrillard dismissed "the discotheque as the lowest form of contemporary entertainment" (Thornton, 1996, p. 1).

most other situations, historically, young women's ability to become intoxicated has been strictly controlled both by men and by other women.⁶

However, while noting the importance of new forms of femininities she also acknowledges the extent to which this sense of feeling "safer, freer and more at home" is coupled with the extent to which notions of masculinity within the scene has also changed. As she notes: "If the rave environment is seen by these women to provide a comfortable space of the playing out of a sense of belonging and madness this is also centrally because it is seen to involve new forms of masculinity" (2001, p.114).

Issues of sexuality play a peripheral role in the gender analyses of dance, clubs, and ecstasy in the above examples. Sexuality is a more central focus in a key early study of club drug use in the gay dance club scene in Lewis and Ross's (1995) *A Select Body*. In this book, based on their ethnography of gay dance clubs in Sydney, Australia, Lewis and Ross examine the relationship between symbols in the dance scene, gay identity, political dynamics, drug use, and sexual risk behaviors. They highlight the importance of examining these issues qualitatively, to understand the dynamic points of view of scene participants and to understand the importance of setting or social context in facilitating drug-using and sexual-risk practices. Their book is somewhat unusual among the cultural studies analyses of club scenes in that it places the issues of drugs, the experience of drug consumption, and the differential meanings of different drugs (e.g., ecstasy vs. Ice [methamphetamine]) for club-goers. While this book is much cited in the literature on club drug use among gay and bisexual men, it less frequently appears in general cultural studies club literature, which continues to primarily focus upon heterosexual clubgoers and scenes.

Surprisingly enough, ethnicity issues have tended to be overlooked in cultural studies research. Fortunately today a few studies have begun to emerge which focus more specifically on ethnicity and the dance scene. The absence of studies on ethnicity and the dance scene is surprising given the growing attention, in cultural studies on Rap and Hip Hop and its role in Black and Latino cultures. For example, writers in both the U.S. (Kitwana, 2002; Rivera, 2003; Rose, 1994), and in the U.K. (Back, 1996; Bennett, 1999; Gilroy, 1987;1993) have examined the importance of ethnic identity and the culture of Rap and Hip Hop. Whether this gap in the cultural studies dance-scene literature is solely due to the dominance of white clubbers in the early rave scene or whether it is yet another example of cultural studies' historical neglect of ethnic minorities is unclear.

The growing popularity of bhangra music both in the U.K. and in the U.S. has occasioned an increased interest in the relationship between ethnicity, ethnic identity and the dance scene. This new focus on bhangra music emerges against a backdrop of historically sparse scholarly attention to South Asian or Asian American youth, especially when compared with more extensive attention given to African American or Afro-Caribbean youth.⁷ This imbalance is doubly noticeable within the field of drug and alcohol research. Since the mid 1960s Asian American youth have been stereotyped as a "model minority" and consequently of less interest to problem-oriented social science researchers. The roots of this neglect go back even further in the history of racism and legal exclusion experienced by Asian Americans since their first arrival in the U.S. in the mid-1800s; South Asians "as a whole have in many ways remained an invisible community in the eyes of academia" (Huq, 1996, p. 62). Recent research is beginning to address this neglect. Maira's book *Desis in the House* (2002) is an important example of this new interest. Maira examined Indian American youth culture and specifically bhangra remix music in New York. Her work is significant not merely because she has focused

⁶For a further discussion of these forms of control see Hunt, MacKenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2000; and Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & Evans, 2002.

⁷This point is also made by Alexander (2000) in her discussion of Asian gang members in the U.K.

on notions of ethnic identity and the dance scene but also because she attempts to utilize and transform the work of Thornton and her theory of subcultural capital, integrating it with recent thinking on ethnicity and ethnic identity, specifically the work of Hall (1992). Hall questions essentialist notions of ethnic identity as unitary, fixed and unchanging and instead argues that ethnic self-identities, far from being fixed, are actively chosen, created, recreated, negotiated and performed by individuals. Their model of ethnicity “emphasizes the socially ‘constructed’ aspects of ethnicity” (Nagel, 1994, p. 101). Like Thornton’s clubbers, Maira’s respondents interpret different forms of ethnic identity as more or less “cool” and “hip.” They use different ways of being Asian and different Asian lifestyles as key symbolic markers to position themselves in relation to others, and especially other Asians, within the scene. This process exhibits the extent to which social groups are differentiated within the dance scene. This way of conceptualizing ethnicity is in marked contrast to the way that ethnicity tends to be used in the drug and alcohol epidemiology literature, where ethnicity operates solely as an inert, individual variable to be measured just like age and sex.

4. What’s missing from the cultural studies literature?

Overall, cultural studies research on raves and the dance scene provides an important counter-balance to the problem-focus approach of much of the drug literature. Given the sharp contrast between the foci of epidemiology and cultural studies on the dance scene and their alternative foci on problems or on pleasure, it is not surprising that the implicit or even explicit conceptualizations of young people are also significantly different. These two approaches reflect dichotomous views 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). These different conceptualizations of the actor are also related to the way that researchers, in both arenas, adopt significantly different research methodologies: quantitative surveys, vs. qualitative interviews and ethnographies.

Cultural studies researchers have provided a detailed analysis of the dance scene and the socio-cultural settings within which youthful drug practices take place. Throughout much of the cultural-studies analysis of the dance scene, though, there has been a curious silence about the drug use itself and any discussion of the illegal nature of drug use. Often, the importance of drugs within the scene is downplayed or brushed aside, mentioned tangentially but not a central part of the analysis. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that cultural studies research has ignored the importance of illicit drugs within the dance scene,⁸ the role of drugs and the importance of their illegal status has been of less significance for many cultural studies researchers. For example, while Malbon (1999) discusses the use of ecstasy and the extent to which it can provide “an additional layer of emotional and sensational action” (p. 116), and Pini (2001) makes a few references, their discussion is secondary to their exploring other more important (to them) features -- in Malbon’s case it is the creation of a communal oneness, in Pini’s it is the gender liberating features of raving. Thornton (1996) has no general reference to drugs and only mentions ecstasy in passing when she admits to having taken it. Bennett (2000) devotes only a small section to drugs and finally Gilbert and Pearson (1999), while noting that drugs “are central to contemporary dance culture” (p. 138), devote only a couple of pages to the topic. In noting their seeming lack of interest in drugs and their illicit qualities we wish not to lessen the importance of their work but more to emphasize the need for a more

⁸See for example Hutton (2006) and Jackson (2004).

thorough cultural studies analysis of youth club drug use, per se, especially given its importance in the lives of young people.

Furthermore, although cultural studies scholars have importantly privileged discussions of pleasure overall, the specific pleasures of drug consumption within the dance scene have not been fully explored. The pleasures of drug consumption are generally subsumed under a broader, more general notion of the pleasures of the scene overall – the pleasures of dancing and of communality. Even less examined than drug pleasures themselves within this research tradition, though, have been the pleasures associated with taking risks in using drugs, whether that be the pharmacological risks or the risks associated with an activity defined as illegal. The risky nature of doing drugs, of being involved in “voluntary illicit risk-taking” (Young, 2007) may further enhance the pleasure. Nor have the risks of drug consumption, themselves, been much examined by cultural studies scholars. While epidemiologists have placed an undue emphasis on the risks and dangers associated with club drugs, the alternative need not be ignoring the question of risk entirely. Nor must an analysis of risk necessarily succumb to the problems of constructing youth as passively in-danger, at-risk, without agency. A cultural studies approach to the analysis of drug risks, one that takes context, agency, and subjectivity, seriously, seems called for. Young people themselves while wishing to have fun and pleasure from becoming intoxicated are not without an understanding of the dangers associated with their using drugs (Hunt, Evans, & Kares, 2007). In fact given the societal emphasis on drug problems especially through the Drug War, it would indeed be surprising if young people were not aware of the potential dangers.

Therefore in order to begin to understand the role of drugs within the lives of young people and the pleasures and risks associated with them, we must now turn to other researchers who, while not specifically focusing on the dance scene, have nevertheless developed theoretical approaches which can assist us in understanding youthful drug use. Thus in the final section of the paper, we will briefly examine one theoretical tradition, arising primarily out of cultural criminology, that may help set the stage for a cultural studies analysis of club-drug consumption within the dance/club scenes and pleasures and risks within it.

CONSTRUCTING A THEORY OF PLEASURE, DRUGS AND DANCE

In 1991 O’Malley and Mugford wrote an article that began to construct a discourse of pleasure around drug use, which can provide a helpful starting point for an analysis of club drugs within the dance scene. As described above, a pathology discourse has dominated the drug-research field and especially epidemiology. The dominance of this discourse stems from researchers basing their conceptualizations of drug use primarily on problematic use, most obviously visible in studies of drug use in treatment-based research. This discourse, while important for understanding problematic drug use, ignores the experience of the vast majority of drug users whose use tends to be non-problematic, episodic, and who “subordinate their drug use to the rhythms of their life” (Mugford, 1994, p. 128). Following this dichotomy of drug use, and adapting Merton’s (1957) theory of anomie, O’Malley and Mugford outline two ideal types: the “deficit-retreatist” and the “leisure-innovative”:

On the one hand, some people use drugs to escape from a reality that is felt to be unpleasant for external reasons.... Such use tends towards addiction.... use comes to be the core of life ... On the other hand, there is a pattern of use that we will ... call leisure use. Leisure use centers upon a mixture of legal and illegal drugs for partying and other pleasure-related purposes ... Such use tends to be episodic and embedded in a wider network of activities that are not dominated by use, but rather limit it. (O’Malley & Mugford, 1991, p. 55)

Given the predominance of “leisure-innovative” drug use, O’Malley and Mugford set out to explain the existence of such drug use utilizing not a pathology discourse, which they argue is inappropriate, but instead developing a discourse of pleasure. To do this, they argue, it is essential to start by examining the role of pleasure and excitement within contemporary culture.

Not only must the pleasure/consumption/identity nexus be explored, though, but also the role of risk within this. Today the desire to discover new and exciting forms of consumption can be seen in contemporary leisure practices which are increasingly associated with elements of the novel, the extraordinary and the transcendental. These features are seen in either the more benign forms of tourism or in more dangerous and risky forms of leisure such as rock climbing and hang-gliding. These more risky ways of achieving excitement and pleasure have been examined by Lyng (1990) who, building on Katz’s (1988) seminal work on the seductions of crime, develops the concept of “edgework.”⁹ Basing his theory on contemporary sociological theories of risk and societal notions of insecurity, he explores the existential and pleasurable nature of “voluntary risk-taking” or edgework. Lyng examines the attraction of dangerous sports and argues that people deliberately involve themselves in such risk-taking behaviors as a way of seizing control and reacting against “the unidentifiable forces that rob one of true individual choice” (Lyng, 1990, p. 870). The need to transcend the normal or the mundane has been noted by other writers, such as Cohen and Taylor (1992) who examine the increasing need for leisure activities to be *out-of-the-ordinary*, and to have the potential of disrupting or breaking *the routine of life*. Emotionally exciting activities “offset the suffocation of an over controlled alienated existence within the mundane reality of modern life” (O’Malley & Mugford, 1994, p. 206). “Transcending the mundane” (O’Malley & Mugford, 1994) and escaping the routine of everyday life provides people with a sense of personal autonomy, self-discovery and self-actualization (Lyng, 2005a).

The search for new and exciting experiences or as Campbell (1989) calls it “the ceaseless consumption of novelty” (p. 205) and “the endless emergence of new wants” (O’Malley & Mugford, 1991, p. 57) create a vital demand for the consumption of new commodities including drugs. Today modern consumerism can be characterized as “a longing to experience in reality those pleasures created and enjoyed in imagination, a longing which results in “our social relationships and self-identities, our forms of cultural expression ... increasingly constructed and negotiated around the consumption of a wide range of mass-produced commodities and activities” (Reith, 2005, p. 228).

Given the desires to seek new identities through the consumption of new commodities (Miles, 2000) plus the desire to discover new thrills to overcome the mundane and inspire “pleasure, excitement, exhilaration, and desire” (Lupton, 1999, p. 167), then it is obvious why ecstasy and other mind altering substances would have such a widespread appeal for young people, especially within the exciting, transgressive, and pleasurable context of the dance scene and its electronic music (Hunt & Evans, In Press).¹⁰ The epidemiological literature, discussed above, documents just how widespread this appeal is; what epidemiology has not been able to do, though, is to theorize fully the reasons and context for it. Though it is important not to reduce motivations for drug consumption solely to these issues (we offer these merely as a jumping off point for future investigations), one of the key attractions of attending dance events and doing drugs may be the possibility of being involved in an exciting and non-mundane activity. Young people are in search of “heightened experiences and extravagant pleasures” (Collison, 1996, p. 430). As Malbon (1999) has noted (though he downplayed the

⁹The term comes from Hunter Thompson (Lupton, 1999, p. 151).

¹⁰The transgressive nature of the music can be seen in the UK government’s Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) which defined rave music as “music that includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats” (Presdee, 2000, p. 117).

drug-specific elements of this) the experience of clubbing allows the individual participant to overcome their “mundane” and everyday life. “The everyday is disrupted, the mundane is forgotten and the ecstatic becomes possible” (Malbon, 1999, p. 164). Or as O’Malley and Mugford argue “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). Moreover, the potential excitement of attending a dance event and using illicit drugs allows young people to “get their kicks in spaces they know well,” spaces that Hayward (2002) has called “performance zones.” These zones become the “site of excitement and social contestation, of experimentation and dissonance” (Hayward, 2002, p. 88) and of course pleasure. The dance club also operates as a place within which transgressions (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1969) can take place. Transgressions are defined as “a process which allows the individual to carry out activities that are otherwise forbidden” (Lalander, 1997, p. 35). Intoxication within these settings allow a transition into what Turner (1969) calls liminality. This liminal period “is characterized by an absence of the social structures that normally order the subject’s world ... or the replacement of one paramount reality by another reality which does not have much in common with the paramount reality” (Lalander, 1997, p. 35). In this state activities not normally acceptable can be performed.¹¹

In other words, within the context of the rave or club, and with the use of mind-altering substances, young people can transform the routine and subvert the elements of control that take place in their everyday lives. As they stand in line outside the event, the anticipation of what is to come increases the excitement, especially given that not all attendees are necessarily allowed in (Malbon, 1999). However, once gaining entry, their everyday lives become reversed. A night out at an event becomes “a celebration of irrational ecstatic behaviour. Night becomes day and specialist clothes are worn not to work but to play. Consumption rather than production is all-important” (Presdee, 2000, p. 119). The purpose of the night out is to consume and enjoy the immediate whether that be in the form of drugs, or music or the spectacle. It is as Presdee (2000) has called it “the perfect form of consumption without context or content” (p. 122), “it is a carnival of ‘otherness,’ of ‘difference’ and defiance” (ibid. 120). Given the extent to which young people today are regulated, curtailed and controlled, once inside they can do the one thing left to them, consume. As the “technologies of surveillance and control have expanded and become more efficient” (Lyng, 2005b, p. 43) avenues of resistance or reaction are still sought for. Young people seek new ways of being and interacting with others. While the dance scene is not reducible to club drug use, nor do all participants consume drugs, neither is drug consumption incidental or tangential to this excitement, defiance, or celebration. Indeed, many young participants of the dance scenes describe club-drug use as fundamentally shaping their experiences within it.

However it is not only the mind-altering and transcending qualities of the drugs or the exciting sensual stimuli of the rave that makes drug use within this setting so appealing. It may also be the idea that young people are pursuing an activity that is defined, at least within the official discourse, as a risky activity. Not only do the drugs’ mood-altering qualities, “enhance the excitement” of dance events, but also the illicit and risky nature of using drugs may further this excitement. Young people like taking risks (Collison, 1996; Plant & Plant, 1992) and doing something illicit or risky contributes to the pleasure and the excitement of the activity (Hayward, 2002; Reith, 2005). “Young people show a willingness to experiment with and enjoy a range of risk taking, exhilarating, and aspirational activities and sensations which includes the experience of intoxication” (Measham, 2004, p. 211). By not attending to the risks (and perceptions of risk) involved with drug consumption, the extant cultural studies scholarship on the dance scene may also be missing the appeal of risk connected to drug use

¹¹For a more detailed discussion of what these activities are see Hunt and Evans (In press).

in the scene. In fact some researchers, such as Reith (2005), have argued that using drugs is the quintessential form of risk taking because it enables the user to transcend or transgress boundaries -- the boundaries of the mundane and the extraordinary, consciousness and unconsciousness. While the specific form of the “high” varies depending on the particular drug ingested, all illegal drugs share one common feature, that of ‘transgression’ from “straight to wasted” (Reith, 2005, p. 236).

However while the risks of drug-taking may sometimes be part of their appeal, it is not the case that young people are unconcerned about drug-related risks. Just as Lyng’s hang gliders or BASE jumpers¹² are cognizant of the dangers so also are young drug users. Just as young clubgoers do not passively succumb to risks (contra the presentation in much of the epidemiological literature) neither do they passively ignore the real risks that do accompany drug consumption. Ravers and clubbers do not simply use drugs in spite of (or because of) the risks, they also actively manage the risks they face (Hunt et al., 2007). They are neither completely unaware nor ill-informed about the drugs they use and their associated effects. Nevertheless, their assessment of these pharmacological properties, and hence their assessment of the potential pleasures and risks, take place within particular social contexts. This confirms both O’Malley and Mugford’s (1991) call for an examination of the way that pleasure is socially constructed as well as Douglas’s (1992) point that risks cannot be viewed as uncontested facts isolated from the socio-cultural context in which they operate. The meanings that young people give to the drugs they use and the potential pleasures and risks associated with them are all socially embedded and socially determined. The cultural studies project to understand youth cultures associated with raves, clubs, and the dance scene will not be complete until it begins to fully grapple with issues of drug-use head on, including the particular pleasures of drug use and the meaning, construction, and contexts of its risks.

CONCLUSION

In order to explain the meaning of ecstasy for young people who attend raves, clubs and parties, we examined two competing academic research discourses: that of drug epidemiological research and cultural studies. The former portrays youthful drug use as a high-risk activity within a social problems paradigm and adopts a fundamentally passive view of young people. This portrayal fits uneasily with the experiences of young people, who describe in detail how important their rave experiences were and who stress the pleasure they obtain from the music, the dancing, and the drugs. Young dance attendees attest to the importance of these events and describe these activities as primarily harmless. In contrast to epidemiology, the cultural studies paradigm describes the rave and dance scene in detail and explores the importance of these activities for young people. Instead of portraying young people as misguided consumers, cultural studies researchers view them as willing actors choosing their lifestyles and the cultural commodities they consume (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Giddens, 1991).

Furthermore the pathology discourse found within drug research is difficult to align with other sociological analysis of the wider culture within which young people are situated. Modern post-industrial society can be described as a period of mass consumption in which the desire to realize the self is through the consumption of commodities and in which young people construct their lifestyles through consuming fashion and music (Campbell, 1989; O’Malley & Mugford, 1991). Given this environment and the extent to which illicit drugs are also cultural commodities to be consumed, a pathological perspective of drug use would seem inappropriate. Far from drugs being an aberration as suggested by the pathology discourse, “drugs epitomize modern culture” (O’Malley & Mugford, 1991, p. 53), or as Gitlin (1990) has remarked “American culture is a drug culture” (p. 45).

¹²See Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng, 2001.

While taking parts of the drug literature as providing important background and comparative information, we have tended to lean more towards the work being currently conducted by a new wave of young sociology and cultural studies researchers. Many of these researchers have produced a series of exciting and innovative texts which have assisted us in locating drug use within the context of youth cultures, subcultures, global developments and cross-cutting issues of gender and ethnicity. However, while this research has been instructive in providing us with important contextual and theoretical information, only a few studies have focused specifically on drug use within the dance scene. Therefore in an attempt to connect the insights of cultural studies research with an understanding of the importance of illicit drugs for many thousands of young people, we have turned to researchers in the newly evolving field of cultural criminology. This research area, which examines the ways in which everyday life is becoming increasingly criminalized (Presdee, 2000), has provided a theoretical framework which fits more accurately with young people's accounts of why they use drugs at dance events. As such it has the potential of correcting a relative silence within the cultural-studies scholarship and opening up new directions for future research.

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