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Symbolic Boundaries, Subcultural Capital, and Prescription Drug Misuse across Youth Cultures

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Abstract

Prescription drug misuse among young adults has surged over the past decade. Yet, the contexts surrounding this misuse remain unclear, particularly subcultural contexts. Many urban young adults participate in youth cultures. This paper describes the subcultural contexts of prescription drug misuse within youth subcultures. Drawing on ethnographic data collected over 12 months from different youth cultural scenes, the authors describe the subcultural bases of prescription drug misuse. The symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital inherent in these scenes shape the ways youth think about drugs and behave accordingly. While young adults are often lumped together, ethnographic data show considerable variation across these subcultures with regard to what may enable or inhibit prescription drug misuse. The broader subcultural ethos in each scene, as well as attitudes towards other types of drugs, frame the ways that prescription drugs are perceived and used within each of these scenes. In this regard, the findings highlight the role of symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital in drug use among young adults by shaping their routine practices. These data highlight that education campaigns about prescription drug misuse should account for the variability in youth cultural scenes to maximize the efficacy of these messages aimed at young adults.

Keywords

prescription drug misuse; youth culture; young adults; symbolic boundaries; subcultural capital

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of prescription drug misuse during the past decade has permeated the worlds that young people inhabit. Indeed, young adults are a key segment of the population for the misuse of prescription drugs; “misuse” typically defined as using prescription drugs obtained from a non-medical source or using prescription drugs for a non-medical or

recreational purpose (Compton & Volkow, 2006). Young adults involved in nightlife scenes have particularly high prevalence of prescription drug misuse (Kelly et al, 2013). They engage in a wide range of social activities, and these distinct social patterns differentially shape how young people think about and engage in (or don't engage in) drug use.

Patterns of interaction among young people often coalesce into youth cultures, which provide important cultural frames for young people. While there is certainly flow between groups of young people, youth cultures comprise meaningful institutions for those who participate in them. In this manner, youth cultures – and the “ways of seeing” within them – remain key influences of drug use among young people (Mulder et al., 2007). They provide a particular frame of reference for those who participate in them, and this way of thinking shapes how youth view themselves in reference to others as well as what they value and esteem, thus shaping how youth behave (Thornton, 1995).

Youth Cultures as Domains of Drug Use

Nightlife scenes inhabited by young adults remain key contexts shaping drug use. Youth cultures have been previously associated with other drug trends, including the use of blunts (Dunlap et al., 2005), amphetamines (Hebdige, 1979), and ecstasy (Gourley, 2004). Indeed, evidence exists for the presence of taste clusters of musical preferences and substance use (Vuolo, Uggen, & Lageson, 2014). Given that youth cultures are themselves numerous and diverse, these wide-ranging contexts may differentially shape patterns of prescription drug misuse among participants, and understanding this trend across several youth cultures may prove important for targeted health promotion efforts.

Given the significance of youth cultures in the lives of young people, it is important to account for how they influence drug trends. While broad epidemiological studies are important, they often treat young adults as a monolithic group, failing to account for the variation across clusters of young people who share activities, mindsets, tastes, and styles on the basis of subcultural affiliation (Vuolo, Uggen & Lageson, 2014). As cultural dynamics vary from subculture to subculture, the practices nested within these domains can be expected to differ as well, and remain a vehicle for establishing boundaries between subcultures. In addition, variations in cultural contexts may support the same practices for different reasons, thus differentially shaping the motivations for and conceptions underlying behaviors.

Youth cultures *function* differently and therefore set different patterns for drug use. This influence is especially likely while drug trends are incubating within subcultures before diffusing more widely (Hamid, 1992). In examining how youth cultures function differently, it remains important to consider attempts to articulate boundaries of distinction *between* their own group and others, as well as attempts to cultivate status and position *within* the youth culture itself. In this regard, considerations of symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992) and subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) are useful analytic tools.

Symbolic Boundaries, Subcultural Capital, & the Organization of Youth Cultures

Groups of people draw symbolic boundaries to create conceptual distinctions between themselves and other types of people (Lamont, 1992). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Lamont asserts that groups use symbolic boundaries to define status and to identify interlopers, thus constructing representational markers that differentiate themselves from “others.” In other words, symbolic boundaries mark position within a subcultural world, used to differentiate insiders from outsiders. Youth cultures enable young people to symbolically distinguish themselves from others. Such elements of distinction not only encourage personal identity development, but also reify and legitimize social differences among youth. These boundaries of distinction enable young people to coalesce around particular sets of ideas, tastes, and practices, which form the basis of subcultures. Such distinctions are important for the development of solidarity and draw people together in the subcultural realm through a shared purpose. Thus, symbolic boundaries do not represent mere differences in taste or preference, but are fundamentally tied to the architecture of status and identity in the youth world.

Beyond the purpose of identifying those whom they are like, symbolic boundaries provide the means for people to articulate whom they are unlike (Bryson, 1996). They allow subcultural members to reject outsiders. In this regard, symbolic boundaries function as measures of exclusion; tastes are defined as much by distaste as they are preference (Bourdieu, 1984). Participation in subcultural activities can reinforce both preferences and distastes within the practice of a broader subcultural ethos, and function as a public validation of group membership. In this regard, symbolic boundaries are formed not merely in rhetoric, but forged in the *routine practices* of members.

Alongside efforts to render themselves distinct from “others,” youth also negotiate and accumulate status by cultivating subcultural capital within their own worlds (Thornton, 1995). The notion of subcultural capital is an extension of Bourdieu’s classic work on cultural capital (1986). Youth cannot forge their identities in the adult realm given their marginal position in that world. As such, youth develop a different order of prestige symbols that function in accordance with the immediacies of their lives. At this stage, youth focus less on things that comprise social position in the adult world and invest heavily in leisure and the elements of their lives that cohere with it (Thornton, 1995).

Subcultural capital directly relates to one’s position in the field of youth social relations. Having greater subcultural capital bestows status upon its possessor within that realm. Yet, subcultural capital is not something that can simply be bought, sold, or traded in a formal or informal market. It is largely an embodied form related to “being in the know” (Thornton, 1995). In this respect, subcultural capital is far more dependent upon having qualities engrained in the individual. These are primarily comprised of social connections, knowledge bases, and experiences with the practices holding prestige in that realm. Much like symbolic boundaries, these elements of subcultural capital are forged in the routine practices of members.

The maintenance of symbolic boundaries and the pursuit of subcultural capital through routine practices lead youth to think and act in particular ways, and shape how they make

sense of their worlds. In this regard, they set broader parameters that shape actions and interactions within these scenes, including drug use. Yet, efforts to define oneself as an insider and earn status within the scene do not have consistent influences; the parameters they set may either enable or inhibit the use of particular drugs, and these function differently in every youth scene. Thus, a key area of inquiry remains how pursuits of status and prestige establish cultural parameters within youth cultures that shape patterns of drug use.

Current Study

We describe the subcultural underpinnings of how young adults view prescription drug misuse. Specifically, we conducted an ethnography to examine aspects of three youth cultures that function either to enable or inhibit the misuse of prescription drugs. This approach allows us to examine not only the nature of prescription drug misuse across youth cultures, but to consider the ways in which routine practices aimed at maintaining symbolic boundaries and accruing subcultural capital shape patterns of drug use among young people more broadly.

METHODS

This project was designed to examine contextual influences of prescription drug misuse among young adults. We utilize the term “misuse” so as to distinguish these patterns of drug consumption from medical “use”, while also not pathologizing young people with the term “abuse,” which inherently suggests harm or dependence. The first phase centered on an ethnography of youth cultures in New York, involving participant-observation and informal interviewing. Five ethnographers – ranging in age from 25 through 32 and diverse in gender and sexual identity – conducted ethnographic research across six youth cultural scenes, over 12 months from March 2010 to March 2011. We present results from three youth cultures rooted in musical scenes – electronic dance music (EDM) scenes, hip-hop scenes, and indie rock scenes.

The ethnography began with social mapping, which facilitated the development of an ethnographic map of the social landscape of nightlife scenes, important since these scenes are dispersed throughout the city. At the outset, we attended a range of venues housing youth cultures to develop profiles of the scenes and assess social patterns within them through observations and informal interviews. The evaluation of these scenes ensured a diverse range of settings were attended during ensuing participant-observation.

We conducted systematic fieldwork by becoming immersed in specific scenes. Rather than broad coverage of all scenes, each ethnographer focused on one or two subcultures to enable depth and immersion. The key feature was active participation in the social milieus of these scenes. We routinely observed cultural processes and social interactions as well as regularly engaged in informal interviews. The relative youth of the ethnographers allowed for an extended presence and the acquisition of roles within these milieus, which further enabled us to develop rapport and insight. Extended ethnographic fieldwork enabled us to connect patterns and practices of prescription drug misuse to the social contexts of these scenes. All fieldwork resulted in documentation via ethnographic fieldnotes. Over the course of the

year, we conducted 266 nights of field observations, each lasting approximately 4 hours. Thus, we collectively spent over 1,000 hours immersed within these scenes. Such an extended presence enabled thick descriptions of these contexts. Fieldnotes contained descriptions of observations and informal interviews. Specific attention was paid to normative behaviors, key cultural frameworks, perceived authenticity and other sources of subcultural capital, drug use patterns, and modes of social interaction.

Analysis

Our analysis occurred through a collective and iterative process. Memoing procedures were used throughout the course of fieldnote writing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Memos highlight potential lines of inquiry and emerging ideas that are grounded in the fieldwork data. Such memos were written based upon observations and informal interviews documented in fieldnotes. The ethnographers regularly met to review and discuss fieldnotes and memos throughout the fieldwork. In this regard, we analyzed ethnographic data continuously to further direct our approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

After the completion of data collection, we analyzed fieldnote data through an iterative process. Using NVIVO software for data analysis, we coded fieldnotes to identify aspects of each scene that either enable or inhibit prescription drug misuse. Regular process meetings were held to discuss emergent findings and permit scrutiny by other ethnographers. Thus, the analytic findings were subject to inquiry by the wider team. All fieldnote data reported in the results highlight key aspects found in these scenes, not isolated phenomena. The fieldnote excerpts presented have codified identifiers indicating the ethnographer and date of fieldwork.

RESULTS

Young adults misuse prescription drugs for many of the same reasons they use other psychoactive drugs. They can provide energy, induce euphoria, alleviate social anxiety, or provide a “body buzz,” among other qualities. In this manner, they fit into a broader pharmacopeia within nightlife scenes. They also provide a useful window into how the cultural contexts of these scenes shape patterns of drug use.

Indie Rock Scene

Our research revealed two contrasting factors that enabled prescription drug misuse in the indie rock scene: an aesthetic of excess and strict norms of comportment. As we will show, the aesthetic of excess tended to be more powerful in underground subscenes, while strict norms of comportment were more powerful in commercial ones.

The aesthetic of excess gets enacted when members believe that to fully enjoy an event, they must live in the moment, avoid consideration of consequences, and push themselves to “party” as hard as they physically can. In this scene, the aesthetic of excess involved behaviors related to the pop-cultural mythology of the “rock star” and related practices of physical disinhibition and drug use. The aesthetic of excess suggests a rejection of mainstream ideas about how the body should be governed in social situations:

A group of five young women were all sitting in a circle. ... Then this tall lanky character with long, curly black hair would come running over, flailing his legs high, grab one of them off the ground, and dance with her in a circle, going faster and faster until the centrifugal force flung them away. Then they would both go stumbling, tripping, and falling onto the floor, where they would roll around with their legs flying up in the air. (JT042410)

The aesthetic of excess is strongly associated with the consumption of alcohol and drugs, especially when consumed socially and in a celebratory manner reminiscent of representations of “rock stars” in popular culture.

People were getting really stoned all around me. Next a bottle of Sobieski vodka appeared and the group passed it all around. The beefy guy I’d seen upstairs praised Sobieski, saying “Other vodkas won’t make you wake up in the grass at McCarren Park like Sobieski will!” Everybody laughed. Josh finished off the vodka with a couple of deep swigs. (JT020311)

The aesthetic of excess becomes a form of prestige cultivation, especially in underground circles, and encourages the misuse of prescription drugs in two ways. First, it enables people to become more intoxicated, leading to the misuse of prescription drugs to medicate hangovers and other after effects of substance use. Second, prescription drugs are incorporated directly into the celebratory drug use of the aesthetic of excess:

A young woman, maybe 19 years old, was talking loudly to all her friends. ... “I can’t give you any more Adderall!” she shouted, loud enough for the whole balcony to hear. “I already gave all my Adderall to Dan! He’s inside dancing! If you want Adderall, talk to Dan.” (JT091510)

While less common than other drugs, the incorporation of prescription drugs into excess-oriented patterns of consumption provided the means for this young man to actively participate in the scene.

The second enabling factor observed was the strict norms of comportment that governed behavior in commercialized scenes, where – in contrast to the underground – participants were more likely to dress stylishly, limit themselves with intoxicants, and remain relatively motionless during shows. This was a return to the rules about the body that the aesthetic of excess rejects. Generally, strict norms of comportment operated in commercialized venues, while the aesthetic of excess operated in underground ones.

Strict norms of comportment became highly visible when some attempted to engage in the aesthetic of excess – often in locales where the underground and commercial scenes came together. This was not uncommon because the broader indie scene’s notions of authenticity actively promoted excess, through ideas connecting drugs with enhanced perception of music or with full participation in the scene. The contradiction between these beliefs and strict norms of comportment led to incidents such as the following, in which a young woman took drugs at a commercial indie event. The promoter spoke about why that was a problem:

“I like shrooms as much as the next person,” She said. “But do shrooms at home with your friends or whatever. Doing them at a club is crazy.” She looked back at

the tripping woman and gave a huff. She and all of her friends seemed unable to talk or think about anything else besides the transgressions of the tripping girl. They were all staring and pointing and talking about how she was climbing on to the stage. Meanwhile, Cole went on singing with the video projecting over himself and onto the wall. He did not acknowledge the tripping girl in any way. (JT110710)

A few minutes later, the promoter addressed the musician and attempted to apologize:

“I’m so sorry about that girl who was crawling up on the stage!,” she said to him, “We couldn’t get her off.” “Oh,” Cole said. “That’s what made it awesome. No, seriously, that made it so much better.” (JT110710)

This exchange clarifies the contradictions that haunt indie rock’s commercial subscene. Do members gather for the indie rock tradition of excess, or for a more businesslike practice of consuming music and meeting friends? Most gravitated toward one subscene or the other depending on how they would answer this question. Yet, ambiguity remained, in which some wanted to experience a small amount of excess and remain in control *at the same time*. This condition, nearly ubiquitous in the commercialized subscene, creates an ideal setting for prescription drug misuse, which may generate euphoric experiences, yet allow the user to appear in control of her body if used carefully.

These enabling factors appeared together with a powerful set of inhibiting factors: (a) incompatibility between prescription drugs and local notions of authenticity; (b) preferences for things perceived as natural; and (c) the unsuitability of prescription drugs in rituals of drug-sharing.

First, there is an incompatibility between prescription drugs and the rock scene’s unique concepts about authenticity, which provided a way to discern “real” members of the scene from interlopers. For example, this is what members did when they criticized bands for becoming famous “just because they were friends with” important show promoters (JT021111), or because “once they start getting a few good shows, they act like assholes to everybody” (JT021111). Another fan put these values into even stronger words:

“What I like is to see a band that’s really getting into it, you know?” he said. “Not some wankers who are making a statement about some idea. (JT060510)

As these statements imply, authenticity in the indie rock scene is a complex value system in which subcultural capital can be earned through the display of such qualities as creativity, sincerity, and a willingness to enact excess with others in the scene. Qualities such as ambition and a calculating approach to social hierarchy were associated with diminished subcultural capital.

Authenticity affected drug use patterns in several ways. First, participants sought to increase their subcultural capital through public consumption of drugs associated with values such as creativity, sincerity, and excess. In practice, aside from heavy alcohol use, this usually meant marijuana, cocaine, and psychedelics, which were traditional to the scene. Second, the indie rock notion of authenticity led people to seek drug experiences worthy of a rock star: especially in the underground, drugs were expected to be social and intense, even dangerous. Prescription drugs, therefore, were rejected by some in the underground:

“Well, you’re not gonna find that with people who are into extreme music,” Dillon said. “... They’re *proud* of their hangovers. It’s like a macho thing. They want their hangover to be as bad as possible, so they’re not gonna pop pills to come *down*. And it’s more than that, really. ... They’re into extremes of experience, so they’re really not going to take those drugs because those drugs make the experience less extreme. They make it more under control. We like dangerous drugs and those are safe drugs.” “You mean, safe from the law?” I said. “No, safe for your body. They’re not going to kill you, you know? People take them so that they don’t get too high or too low. They use them to maintain control. You’re not gonna find that in any extreme music scene. You should look in the hipster scene, the ones who like shoegaze and all that British stuff.” (JT020911)

Note that the speaker ascribes prescription drug misuse to those he considers less authentic—the word “hipster,” for many within this scene, essentially means “an inauthentic person.” And, while not all participants would agree with his comments about liking “dangerous drugs,” people often reacted to our questions about prescription drug misuse in this scene with skepticism. Members took pride in their own reliance on the scene’s traditional drugs and assumed that others did, too.

A second inhibiting factor was a preference for natural things. This was a broad aesthetic sensibility in which things perceived “natural” were preferred over the “synthetic”: organic foods over packaged ones, guitar players over DJs, casual outfits over highly manicured ones, and drugs that “came out of the ground” over ones made in a laboratory, particularly a corporate one.

One of the clearest manifestations of this preference was the look of the performance spaces themselves, especially in the underground. While venues in other scenes cultivated a highly stylized look, venues in this scene had a sloppy, laissez-faire décor. Encrustations of stickers and graffiti, visible kitchens and sleeping areas, and deliberately DIY lighting systems and decor all expressed this aspect of indie aesthetics:

This scene is obsessed with things that look sloppy, hand-made, and soulful. They enjoy the way the stickers, tags, and comments in marker accumulate on the walls and doors here. It gives a sense of humanity and chaos that you would NEVER see in the bathroom at a dance club. (JT041710)

This was simultaneously a way of celebrating the lifestyle choices of members and rejecting the corporate aesthetics of mainstream venues. The origins of prescription medications in corporate pharmaceutical laboratories went directly against this aspect of the indie rock scene’s system of values and subcultural capital.

The third inhibitor was the unsuitability of prescription drugs in sharing rituals traditional to the scene. In a process connected to the aesthetic of excess, drugs are shared freely here, even with strangers. For instance:

The guitar player came over and asked if anybody had a light. He was holding a long, intense-looking joint in his huge hands. I gave him my lighter and he lit the

joint. ... Everybody smoked some, then they offered it to me. I declined, feeling like an asshole. (JT042410)

This ritual of sharing drugs, especially marijuana, creates a space of enhanced intimacy in which friendships are often initiated. However, sharing rituals are often limited to alcohol and illicit drugs traditional to the scene – e.g. shots of alcohol, passing a joint, or sharing bumps of cocaine. While the use of these drugs was celebratory and social, prescription drugs were used alone or passed between intimates, often for instrumental purposes. Members themselves noticed this difference, often judging the solitary use of prescription drugs as isolating:

“With the pot and the coke, you’re gonna see it because people are gonna pass it over to you,” he said. “They don’t do that with the pills. Nobody’s gonna be like ‘Hey, want a Xanax?’ They hoard that stuff. It’s like ‘Don’t touch my pills!’” (JT020911)

The absence of prescription drugs from sharing rituals meant that a pathway for the circulation of drugs through social networks was diminished. Because sharing was an important source of drugs for some participants, the absence of prescription drugs from these rituals significantly inhibited their use.

The three inhibitors observed in the indie rock scene were especially powerful in the underground. In these social spaces, all three tended to reinforce one another within the routine practices of members, thus inhibiting prescription drug misuse. In the commercial subscenes, these inhibitors were weaker because less-involved participants derived less from perceived authenticity and naturalness as a source of subcultural capital.

Hip Hop Scene

We observed no instances of prescription drug misuse in the hip-hop scene, and identified only one factor that might enable it, the treatment of drugs as currency during exchanges at hip-hop events. While sharing drugs was a common way of deepening social relationships in other scenes, drugs were rarely shared in the hip-hop scene. Instead, men worked out barter arrangements for exchanges of intoxicants. For instance, one might be included in a round of blunt-smoking in exchange for contributing marijuana:

I noticed that there was this Asian girl who wore a top hat and a button down shirt in which the top half was unbuttoned. She broke up some weed in her hands as another guy stood behind her and broke apart a philly blunt. Then, this short guy came up to them and whispered something in the white guys’ ear and he nodded. The short guy then handed the girl some more pot and began to break apart another blunt. ... Soon, the girl finished breaking up the weed and as the guys were taking some to fill up their blunts, the short guy began arguing about the amount being divided up into the two blunts. The other guy didn’t seem to be in the mood to argue so he put some more pot into the short guy’s blunt. The two guys rolled the blunts up and instantly lit them. The two guys basically smoked the blunts themselves, occasionally passing them to the girl. (MP042010)

Other typical exchanges involved buying drinks or offering a bump of cocaine in exchange for a few hits from a blunt. In this scene, subcultural capital was connected with toughness and calculated trading, not sharing and generosity.

This attitude is an enabler for prescription drug misuse because, by monetizing prescription drugs, it nullifies factors that would otherwise inhibit them in this scene. For example, prescription drugs are normally discouraged because they do not help participants display masculinity; therefore, someone who shared prescription drugs might risk losing status. Turning that exchange into a “strictly business” deal, however, strips the interaction of these factors by making it seem as though each person is simply trying to get the best deal he can. For example:

According to Darrell, some brought Rx drugs, which they used to trade for more difficult-to-get substances such as ecstasy and coke. In this way, Rx drugs were a form of currency that could be used to obtain other drugs in “the world we run in, the nightlife world,” Darrell said. (JT021611)

Outside of this enabling factor, much about the hip-hop scene discouraged prescription drug misuse. We consider three main inhibiting factors: (a) hypermasculinity and its attending lack of sociability; (b) an incompatibility between prescription drug misuse and notions of authenticity; and (c) the inappropriateness of prescription drugs for routines of conspicuous consumption.

In the commercial subscene, men often displayed hypermasculine behaviors. They were intent on gaining status by performing a self that was tough, stoic, and potentially dangerous. Sensitive to anything that might threaten this display of masculinity, particularly disrespect, men showed a profound lack of sociability and rarely spoke with others outside their core friends:

This MC tried to get involved with the crowd by trying some call and response chants, but the crowd barely responded. He wasn’t getting booed, but as far as I was concerned he might as well have as the crowd’s response was almost non-existent. I remember being shocked looking over the crowd; they seemed completely uninterested in this MC as well as each other. Everyone was just sort of standing there, silently listening and completely motionless. (MP033110)

The main exception to this lack of sociability appeared in the case of perceived disrespect from others, which was met with open hostility:

It became obvious just how drunk some of the attendees were as it was nearly impossible to move without either being bumped into or bumping into others who could barely stand up straight. This bumping into people was met with much hostility, be it either a mean stare or a quick “Yo, what the fuck?” (MP033110)

This gendered pattern of behavior inhibited prescription drug misuse because it is not an explicitly masculine behavior. In some circles, given these drugs’ association with illness and anxiety, the misuse of such substances may be construed as feminizing. The performance of masculinity and its attending lack of sociality also inhibit network connections, a primary means by which prescription drugs are shared.

The second inhibiting factor was the deep incompatibility between prescription drugs and local notions of authenticity. In musical terms, participants usually signaled their desire to distinguish the authentic from the fake by mentioning “real hip-hop.” The following passage sheds some light on what this phrase implied, at least when applied to musicians:

His friend interjected and completely disagreed with the need to “over dub” vocals live. I asked him why he felt that way. He said it’s like rapping with training wheels on and he was shocked that a rapper would be allowed to do that at this show. I asked him why he felt that way and he basically told me that this show was all about “real” hip hop and that classic hip hop artists had to rely on just their own skills on the mic and their DJ’s skills on the turntables. (JT072410)

Note the personal qualities that MCs were expected to have: resourcefulness, self-reliance, integrity. The attributes suggested by the use of prescription drugs—dependence, illness, and so on—were more likely to damage these values than to enhance them. This was even more true for the wider array of attributes associated with authenticity among hip-hop scene participants, which included having grown up in a rough neighborhood, possession of respect and power, and physical strength and stamina. Often, authenticity displays involved a highly dialectical communication cycle, in which the performer affirmed the attribute and the audience then cheered in support:

The place began to reek of pot as many of the guys on stage were smoking blunts. The MC kept shouting out “D block” (a notorious part of Yonkers) and every time he did, the crowd erupted into cheers. It was obvious that a lot of people came down from Yonkers to pay respect to one of their MCs. (MP060810)

Men in this scene attempted to embody this code of authenticity through putting on a tough, stoic front and competing playfully with their friends:

I asked him why he thought that it was difficult to talk to people at shows and why he thought his friends had been getting into fights at shows. Ron told me that people put on this tough guy front at shows as they’re mirroring the gangster, tough guy image portrayed in hip hop media like MTV and BET rap videos. I then turned the question on him and asked him why he thought that I would respond any differently when he approached me. He then told me that it’s all basically a gamble. (MP051210)

Few substances helped members increase their subcultural capital: liquor often consumed as a shot, marijuana smoked as a blunt, and, very occasionally, cocaine. These substances enhanced prestige via authenticity for several reasons. First, each had a pedigree within hip-hop culture. Additionally, they were expensive and tested the physical stamina of the user. Prescription drugs lack in these aspects, and were perceived as safe, legal, and not particularly expensive. Therefore, participants were likely to view them as inauthentic and potentially damaging to their reputations.

The third inhibiting factor had to do with the inappropriateness of prescription drugs for routines of conspicuous consumption. Almost every type of consumption practice possible in a club environment was incorporated into conspicuous consumption in this scene. VIP

membership and bottle service represented an avenue for it. Clothing and fashion, meanwhile, was expected to be brand-new and expensive:

Most people were dressed to impress as they were wearing flashy chains with expensive button downs or designer t-shirts, while others wore sweat suit pants with matching zip up hoodies with pristine white Nike uptowns on and doo rags worn underneath baseball caps worn slightly crooked with the stickers on the brim that signify the cap's authenticity. (MP033110)

The same dynamic extended to the consumption of substances. In no other scene was substance use so consistently public, so thick with messages intended for onlookers. This was not a scene where participants went to the bathroom or took a walk around the block when they wanted to smoke a blunt. Instead, they often picked a highly visible location and were encouraged in this by the performers:

Before finishing his set, the rapper did a song about smoking weed and he demanded that people in the crowd "light 'em up if you got 'em". Many members of the crowd followed suit and the venue began to reek like pot. The MC even took a toke off of a joint that these two guys were smoking right in front of the stage. (MP072410)

It is easy to see why the emphasis on conspicuous consumption in this scene would inhibit prescription drug misuse. This scene has found ways to make all of its traditional drugs as visible as possible—the emphasis on blunts and shots for instance—but small pills do not lend themselves to this type of use. The very invisibility that participants in other scenes value about prescription drugs makes them unappealing in the hip-hop scene.

EDM Scene

The EDM scene is oriented around dancing to electronic music played by DJs. It is divided into a number of subscenes with specific styles of music and which view themselves as distinct scenes. Scenes organized around relatively new styles of EDM music (like dubstep and psytrance) tended to attract a younger audience than established styles (like house and techno). We identified two major factors that enabled prescription drug misuse in this scene: the use of prescription drugs to regulate the effects of club drugs and a preference for artificial things.

Some users of club drugs took prescription drugs to regulate their effects. They misused prescription painkillers and sedatives to sleep after taking doses of cocaine or ecstasy that would otherwise keep them awake, or to medicate unpleasant effects of drug use that arose the following day:

I asked what the Xanax was for. Xavier told me that he had an important meeting the next day and that he needed to sleep before he went to it. He would take some Xanax before he got home to temper the effects of the Ecstasy he'd taken and allow him to sleep. He lived in Northern New Jersey and got there on the NJ Transit, so with luck he might be getting home at 6:00 am or so.... I asked him which he'd gotten into first, Ecstasy or Xanax. He said Ecstasy, and that he heard about the Xanax after he'd been doing Ecstasy at parties for a while. (JT041610)

The use of prescription sedatives allowed him to continue using club drugs while minimizing the sacrifice of his responsibilities. Note that this practice is part of the scene's culture; Xavier learned about the use of Xanax from other members.

Others regulated the mellowness associated with marijuana by mixing it with prescription stimulants like Adderall. This phenomenon was especially pronounced because it was common for EDM events to continue until 4am, 6am, or even 10am, and participants who remained dancing and active until the end earned subcultural capital.

In a little while the music started to change and it was clear that the party was over. It was 4:30am. Dave was confused. He said he'd planned on being here dancing to dubstep all night. He said that was why he'd taken the Adderall. ... I asked whether he took Adderall frequently when he went out to party. He said he used it sometimes, if he wanted to be out all night, and usually mixed it with pot. (JT061810)

The second enabler we observed was a preference for the artificial. This was analogous to the preference for natural things found in the indie scene, but reversed so that participants preferred DJs over guitarists, hi-end sound systems over DIY ones, and stylish clothes over scrappy looks. These environments conveyed the preference for machine-made perfection. At the same time, the preference for artificial things functioned to create a feeling that the best things in life were new and high functioning. Prescription drugs, as high-performance, corporate, and synthetic psychoactive compounds, fit in well with the general aesthetics of this scene and remained widespread, especially relative to scenes based primarily around other forms of music.

These enablers were mitigated by two inhibiting factors: incompatibility between prescription drugs and the subcultural system of authenticity, and a preference for psychedelic drugs seen as appropriate for the EDM experience. These inhibiting factors tended to be strongest among those at the center of the scene. Casual participants were less inhibited by them.

Like other scenes based around music, the EDM scene contained local notions of authenticity that formed a key source of subcultural capital; the idea of having deep roots and history within the scene was a primary component. Some tried to demonstrate this by discussing their knowledge of the scene's history. Others demonstrated their connection with the scene's roots by discussing famous DJs they knew. The practice of having one's picture taken with famous DJs was a way of preparing oneself to do this in the future.

This emphasis on tradition may inhibit prescription drug misuse simply because they are not viewed as part of EDM's roots. This factor was especially strong in older subscenes such as the one around drum and bass, where prescription drugs were rare and participants stayed awake relying on caffeine and energy drinks rather than on prescription stimulants. This factor was weaker in newer subscenes such as dubstep, whose roots were still being formed.

The second inhibiting factor involved an incompatibility between prescription drug misuse and the quest for altered experiences, another source of capital in most EDM subscenes. Especially among younger participants, the holy grail of participation is the attainment of

deeply altered states through the combination of club drugs and sustained dancing. The altered state-seekers who stepped off the dance floor to speak with us described this experience with passion.

I asked them what they thought of the dubstep. “It’s great,” said Adam, who generally spoke in short sentences. Rhiannon was more florid. “It’s amazing,” she said. “I can feel the bass just rippling through my entire body. The music is just taking me away. It’s like I’m dancing and I’m not even in control of what’s happening.” (JT061210)

The pursuit of such experiences inhibits prescription drug misuse, first because prescription drugs did not contribute directly to this experience (although they contributed indirectly by helping participants stay awake), and second because some believed that prescription drugs belonged to category of “bad drugs” seen as spiritually and physically dangerous:

You know, there’s good and bad drugs. I mean, the drugs I do are basically all good drugs. All drugs are bad, I guess, in a way, but you know what I mean. Some drugs are bad: heroin, coke, oxycontin, prescription. I never touch any of that shit. That shit just kills your soul. (JT071010)

The “good drugs” this man spoke of included ecstasy, LSD, ketamine, and mushrooms, all of which were associated with trance experiences, or what scene members sometimes called “the expansion of consciousness.”

It’s important to note that the EDM scene’s inhibiting factors depend entirely on its own internal norms and systems of subcultural capital. Therefore, these inhibitors primarily influence the behavior of those at the center of the scene who have been fully socialized into these ideas. The scene does not generate the same level of inhibition for more casual participants.

DISCUSSION

Nightlife scenes that house youth cultures remain key contexts that shape patterns of drug use among young people. With the growth in prescription drug misuse, these scenes provide particular contexts for this emerging drug trend, and differentially shape patterns of misuse in accordance with the cultural milieus they provide. In this regard, the phenomenon of prescription drug misuse highlights how youth cultures – as clusters of young people organized around specific activities, mindsets, tastes, and styles – influence patterns of drug use beyond specific drug rituals through the common routine practices engaged in by young people. Importantly, this paper identifies that there are cultural dimensions to many youth cultures that both enable *and* inhibit particular forms of drug use. Although youth cultures are often portrayed as fomenting drug use, as cultural contexts, they provide nuanced and varied influences on drug use.

The broader cultural frameworks of these varied youth cultures shape the ways in which prescription drugs are viewed, valued, and used within these scenes. Practices aimed at cultivating prestige and articulating boundaries set the parameters for how certain drugs may be incorporated into a scene. For example, the aesthetic of excess in the indie rock

underground not only allows youth to distinguish themselves from youth in other scenes and earn status within their own, but defines the basis of appropriate drug use as well. In this regard, symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital within each scene set broader parameters for how young people conceive of drug use and enact their routines (Bourdieu, 1984). Yet, the role of symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital in shaping drug use need not be overt or directly tied to drugs themselves. Young people involved in various youth cultures generate particular logics of practice on the basis of strategies to erect symbolic boundaries – between themselves and those on the “outside” – and cultivate capital – to achieve status within their scenes (Bourdieu, 1986). The routine practices, such as modes of interaction and cultural aesthetics, that ultimately influence drug use within these scenes are enacted through efforts related to symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital (Lamont, 1992; Thornton, 1995). Thus, efforts to maintain boundaries and earn capital indirectly shape how young people think about particular drugs and the instrumental value such drugs have within each scene. Even when such boundaries do not directly pertain to drugs, their broader cultural influences set the parameters for how young people think about drugs and how drugs fit into the dynamics of these scenes.

The findings described above also highlight how symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital produce different meanings underlying similar drug use practices. Even when the same substances are used in different youth cultures, the differences in how young people establish hierarchies of inclusion and status influence how these distinctions become inflected in the meanings underlying drug use practices. In this regard, these parameters establish the different meanings and implications that drugs have across youth cultures.

Considerations of routine practice extend early deviance scholars’ foci on how normative structures influence the experience of drugs (e.g. Becker, 1953; Davis & Munoz, 1968). Yet, the critical element of the subcultures is the organization of routine practices through which such norms become sedimented within the individual. These practices become culturally defined and routinized through the interactions with other members that are informed by following prescriptions for status and position; these are important features of the value system within subcultures as well as a component of identity development for young people. The element of routines within these subcultures is a critical component of thinking of them as cultural domains, as the routinized element of these interactions becomes a means of habituating young people into that cultural system in mundane ways that have subtle influences on behavior.

The paper also highlights the extent to which embeddedness in a subculture matters for the ways in which symbolic boundaries and subcultural capital influence members’ behaviors. Those more deeply embedded in underground scenes, and thus more central within the subculture, experience the resonance of these influences more profoundly – in part because the components of subcultural capital and symbolic boundaries are more meaningful to them. Those on the commercial periphery, by contrast, appear to be less subject to the impressions of the cultural dimensions of these scenes. The weight of influence matters because these in turn shape the extent to which the cultural contexts enable or inhibit particular forms of drug use.

These considerations are not merely useful for sociological inquiry, but for approaches to reducing harm. In particular, the framing of youth cultures as cultural communities leads to the potential fostering of “*intraventions*.” As Friedman and colleagues describe, “*intraventions*” are “prevention activities that are conducted and sustained through processes within communities themselves” (Friedman et al, 2004, p 251). Rather than being imposed by professionals, *intraventions* have organic qualities and are nurtured within the subculture. They are grounded within communities in an attempt to ameliorate harms in culturally-sanctioned ways. *Intraventions* thus adhere to a subcultural logic and value system of that subculture. As noted above, there are elements of each youth culture that inhibit prescription drug misuse, and those may be leveraged to prevent use, reduce use, or enable harm reduction strategies. These present practical approaches reducing harm within youth cultural scenes.

Limitations

As is common to most methods, certain limitations must be considered. One is simply that an ethnographer cannot attend all locations in a large city that house a youth culture and achieve the depth intrinsic to the method. While we aimed to mitigate this via social mapping, we recognize that practitioners of the ethnographic method generally sacrifice breadth to achieve this depth. Yet, the comparative component of this ethnography also permits us to consider the applicability of conceptual frameworks across youth cultures. Another limitation is that only those scene members who physically appear in the venues can be included. Membership may not only relate to presence within venues but also with characteristics such as social networks, musical tastes, and forms of subcultural capital. Some who may meet these criteria did not always show up. This limitation may inflate contact with those who may be more likely to stay out and remain active. An additional limitation of this study has to do with location; New York City is a highly specific social context. While we believe many aspects of our results can be extended to other locations, especially major urban centers, further research is needed in order to understand exactly how prescription drug misuse may vary regionally.

Considerations

There are clear differences in patterns of drug use across youth cultures. These differences are influenced by a broader subcultural context governed by how youth pursue status within their scene and maintain markers of distinction from others. The parameters of drug use are forged in the routine practices that are aimed at generating subcultural capital and drawing symbolic boundaries. Such routine practices establish the architecture for broader patterns of behavior, including drug use, and influence such behaviors in indirect ways. These influences must be accounted for in any efforts to influence patterns of drug use within youth cultures.

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