



Listening & Talking to Young People Who Use Drugs

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Fig. II. Gemeiner Hanf (*Cannabis sativa* L.).

Weibliche Pflanze. Nach der Natur.
1. Teil einer männlichen Pflanze. 2. Eine männliche Blüte. 3. Aufgeschnittenes Staubgefäß. 4. Ein Haar a und eine gestielte Oeldrüse b aus der weibl. Blütenhülle. 5. Eine weibliche Blüte. 6. Deckblatt, bl Blütenhülle, n Narben. 7. Dieselbe ohne Blütenhülle, p Perigon, fr Fruchtknoten. 8. Fruchtknoten im Längsdurchschnitt. 9. Eichen. 10. Nüsschen mit Blütenhülle bl. 11. Das Nüsschen ohne Blütenhülle. 12. Längsschnitt desselben; w Würselchen, l Samenlappen des Embryo. 13. Basizelle; a abgerissenes, b natürliches Ende; p Porenkanäle. Fig. 1–10 nach Berg, Fig. 11 nach Wiesner.

What is a drug?

➤ By effect/drug 'family'

- Cannabinoids (Cannabis, SCRAAs ['Spice'])
- Stimulants (caffeine, cocaine, speed)
- Depressants (Alcohol, heroin, benzos)
- Empathogens (MDMA/Ecstasy)
- Dissociatives (Ketamine)
- Hallucinogenics (Mushrooms, LSD/Acid)

➤ By legal status

- Legal (but regulated eg. tobacco)
- **Illegal** (so prohibited/banned, but not regulated)
- Illicit/grey-area (legal status is unclear/depends on use/user)

➤ By political decree

- Historically, those in power decide what 'a drug' is (as opposed to say a medicine)





Setting the Scene (1)

Focus on those psychoactive substances controlled by the UK's Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

Illegal drugs = criminal penalties for production, distribution and possession, but not use, unlike for eg. Sweden (Levy 2018)

Prohibition regime with focus on law enforcement and prevention; minimal spending on treatment services and harm reduction interventions

Little or no robust evidence of (assumed) deterrent effect of drug laws or related law enforcement activities (esp. street policing) such as drug-S&S

Much robust evidence about disparities in S&S rates, drug arrest rates, prison sentencing and other penalties between white majority population and racialised minorities, especially young Black and Asian men in urban areas

UK government state they are “sending messages” about “tough choices” to those considering or already taking drugs

Also “talking tough” on enforcement of for eg. County Lines (Spicer 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2020)

Majority of cannabis cautions given to young people in the UK

40% of school exclusions relate to drugs found in a young person's possession

Setting the Scene (2)

Prevalence

According to ONS data series (from 1984 - date) highest rates of illegal drug use in England and Wales is among 16-24 year olds, as compared to all other age groups

Also worth noting the UK has the highest rate of illegal drug use in Western Europe (EMCDDA 2020), including among young people aged 11 to 18 years of age

1 in 10 11-15 year olds report using an illegal drug in the past month (NHS Digital 2020)

From DMD for England and Wales year ending March 2020 (ONS, latest release)

Around one in five people aged 16 to 24 years took a drug in the last year (21%; approximately **1.3 million young people**, mostly cannabis)

7.4% of 16 to 24 year olds took a Class A drug in the last year (approximately **467,000 young people**, mostly powder cocaine and MDMA/E)

Among 16 to 24 year olds, 10% had used any drug in the past month (around **622,000 young people**)



Setting the Scene (3)

The prohibition regime and the WoD **criminalises, stigmatises and marginalises** young people around the world

It is in this troubling context that we need to listen and talk to young people about drugs, drug use, and drug policy

Further, prohibition and the WoD shapes the tendency to talk *at* (rather than *to*, or *with*) young people about drugs for eg. teaching total abstinence, through “*Just Say No*” campaigns, typically aimed at young people

A word on stigmatising language

The 'war on drugs', a war on drug users (Buchanan 2000)

Why it matters

Stigma reduces help-seeking

Stigma and specifically drug-related racial stereotypes perpetuate social injustice (Karem 2020)

Stigma situates to 'problem' within the individual; "drug user" becomes one's 'master identity' (Becker 1975: 98-101)

- General: *Junkie, addict, alcoholic*, Substance specific: *Bag-head (heroin), Spice Zombie (SCRAs)*, Towards drug vendors: *evil dealers, pushers, gangsters*; Towards "recreational drug-takers": *reckless hedonists, naïve victims*

Challenging drug-related stigma ie. in journalism (GDPC 2017)

Language matters

Young people who consume drugs in recreational settings?

From 'drug users' to PWUDs, and so YPWUDs?

Just say No?

Still today alcohol and drug education focuses on talking *at* children young people about drugs, whilst pretending they don't take them or criminalising if they do (Flacks 2021)

More recent issues around **resilience**, recently taken up by BJ who states new drugs education will build resilience to say no to drugs

Alcohol and drugs education in schools and colleges (so children and YP up to age of 19) very patchy (DoE 2020)

- Huge literature on the 'efficacy' (or otherwise) of drug education programmes, much of it from the US
- Still little if anything that listens to young people talking about their drug use experiences

So, we tend to talk *at* young people about drugs, with a sole focus on risks and harms, whilst ignoring pleasures



Just say know?

Information sharing is crucial to support YP to use drugs more safely

Public health informed harm reduction, pragmatic approach rests on knowledge that **some young people do take drugs**

Supporting safer drug use, not 'encouraging'

But these 'information/drug knowledge' approaches and 'brief interventions' is not the same as **listening and talking to young people** about drugs, drug use and drug policy is not quite the same

Instead, a more emergent idea, rests on work in social drug research community around **listening and talking to PWUDs** about their experiences

Related activism aims to reduce harms of prohibition outlined previously

Focus is on *inclusive* democratic policy making processes, ie. including **YPWUDs**



PWUDs and drug policy-making

- “Policy should be informed by the people it directly affects; however, the voices of people who use illicit drugs have been marginalised from drug policy debate. It is essential that all voices be heard, including those of drug users. This is rarely the case. For instance, almost all public opinion research has focused on general population surveys. Our work ...is a beginning to the incorporation of the **opinions of “affected communities” into policy analysis**” (Lancaster, Ritter, & Stafford 2013)
- ENPWUDs & INPWUDs, also local networks, and those for specific groups
- Drug policy charities emerged globally seeking to ‘give voice’ to family and friends who have lost loved ones to drug-related deaths, seeking change drug policy as a result (ie. *Anyone’s Child* in the UK; bereaved mothers in producer countries)

Young PWUDs are affected communities” in this model, as are their families and friends



Listening to YPWUDs talking *about* drugs

YP, and in particular YPWUDs, do talk about drugs, intoxication etc, especially with each other, in range of physical/online spaces, and on mix of platforms

YPWUDs have valuable and context specific lay knowledge and experiences to inform harm reduction interventions (bottom-up, and evidence-led models)

YPWUDs are at 'front line' of illegal markets for substances such as Nos gas, and 'boutique weed', often these are tech-enabled markets

Exploring appropriate ways of listening



Listening to YPWUDs talking *about* drugs

*“In the first lockdown when the weather was good for three weeks, **I drank every day**, mainly because there was nothing else to do to pass the time other than sit in the garden and drink. The fact that all four of my housemates were in with me meant that we all encouraged each other to drink every day.”*

(Female, 22 years of age, Manchester)

GMTrends 2021, quotes from young people in Greater Manchester about their drug use during pandemic lockdowns (online survey)



Listening to YPWUDs talking *about* drugs

*“**Ket** is the perfect stay at home drug so instead of going out drinking every week, you stay home and do ket on the weekends instead.” (Female, 23, Salford)*

“I used to use MDMA a lot more than ket but now I use ket a lot as there is no comedown and it affects me mentally less than MD[MA] does.” (Female, 20, Manchester)

GMTrends 2021, substance use at parties in domestic spaces, see also *Behind Closed Doors* and *Safer Partying* projects @clubresearch.org

Listening to YPWUDs talking *about* drugs

*"It is easier to do at home than in a club so having seshes [sessions] at home means you may as well get some of this in. [. . .] **Noz** is such a faff that you don't really do it like out in a club, you do it at a pre-sesh or afters or at a party. All the seshes this year have been **at home** so obviously you have more chance to do noz."*

(Female, 23, Salford)

GMTrends 2021, NoS gas, popular amongst UK young people, brought under the PSA 2016 with no criminal penalties for possession (de jure decriminalisation). Highlights preference for 'private' spaces over 'faff' of (semi)public leisure spaces

Barriers to overcome when T&L

Multiple **ethical and practical barriers** around listening and talking to young people about drugs

Heightened by the prohibition and WoD context

‘Tough on drugs’ language can silence YPWUDs

Stigmatising language creates fear among young people, and shapes help-seeking practices

Illegal drugs & drug use are **sensitive and high risk topic**

Advocating for young people in drug policy-making spaces which are inaccessible (ie. Select Committees!), but careful of worsening silencing



What can we do?

Listening and talking with young people about drugs is so important, which may be summarised in **three Ps**

Prevalence: Young people have high rates of drug use relative to older age groups (UNODC, EMCDDA); UK particularly high (ONS)

Prohibition: Young people are negatively and variably impacted upon by global prohibition and the WoD, whether or not they consume drugs (Transform 2020)

Participation: Young people, including our most marginalised YPWUDs, should be enabled to participate meaningfully in drug debates and drug policy development, at local, national and international levels (For egs. in Youth Justice see Smithson & Jones 2021, Smithson et al 2020)

What can we do?

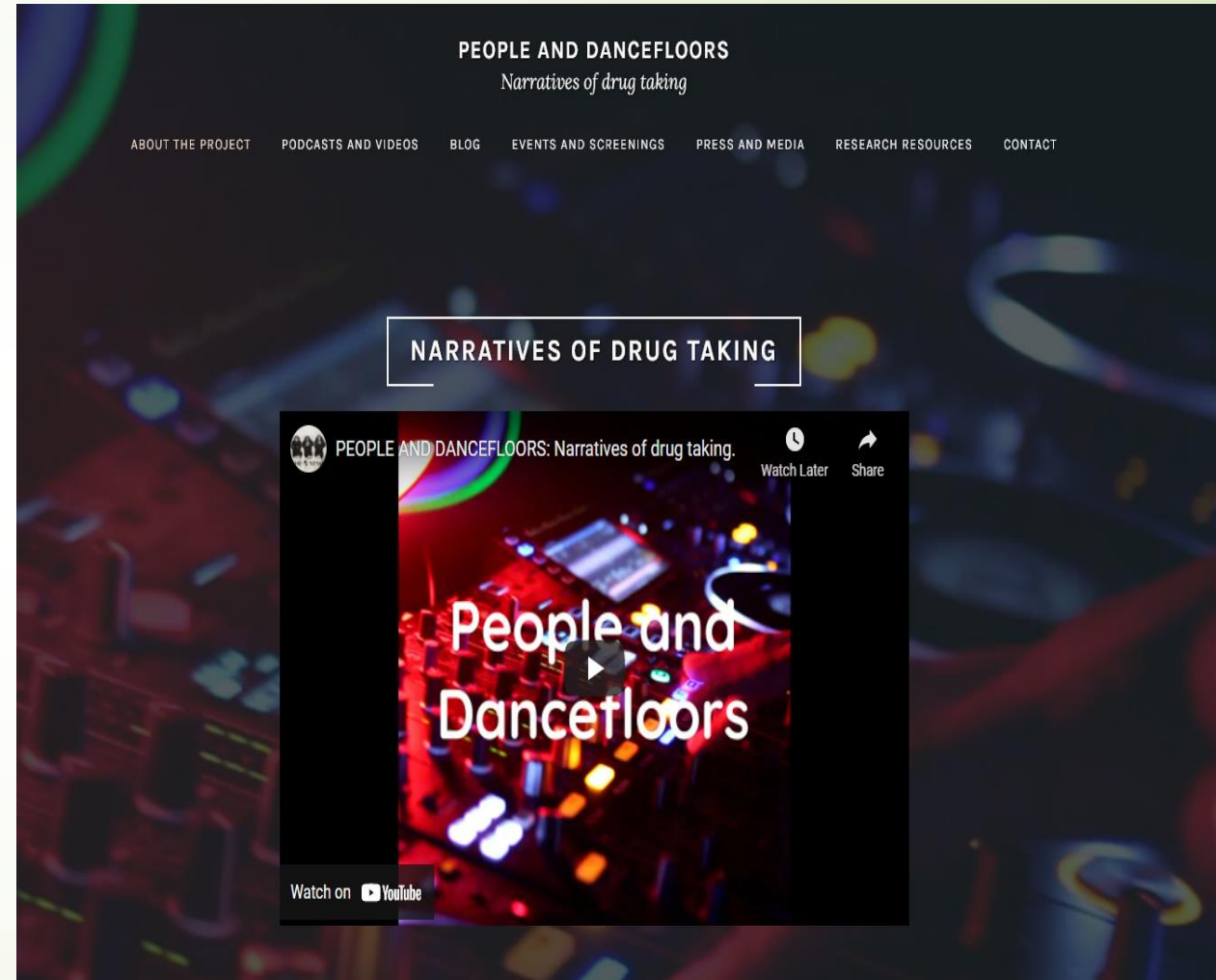
Lets listen to young people when they talk about drugs, whilst exploring creative ways in which to incorporate their voices into drug debates, and in drug policy-making and future drug policy development

This is happening!

Projects using participatory frameworks, such as the People and Dancefloors project, focus among other things, on meanings of drug use on dancefloors for young participants' everyday/night lives

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQhe_gVvlzY

<http://peopleanddancefloors.com/>



Links

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/from-harm-to-hope-a-10-year-drugs-plan-to-cut-crime-and-save-lives>
- <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/drugmisuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020>
- <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/smoking-drinking-and-drug-use-among-young-people-in-england>
- http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/GCDP-Report-2017_Perceptions-ENGLISH.pdf
- <https://gmtrends.mmu.ac.uk/>
- https://gmtrends.mmu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/GM_TRENDS_2021_Main_Report_1.0.pdf
- <https://anyoneschild.org/>
- <http://peopleanddancefloors.com/>
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