

Dependent women drug user's agency, autonomy & pleasure in the context of abuse, poverty & oppression

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Conceptualising agency & pleasure

- Context - social & economic marginalisation & victimization.
- Achievements of feminist criminological work on dependent female drug users (e.g. Rosenbaum 1981, Taylor 1993, Campbell 2000, Du Rose 2015).
- Dependent women's pleasure in the drug world remains largely unexplored.

Why?

- A discourse dominated by images of inequality, criminality, pain, misery, victimization & disease

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susceptible to adverse legal, medical & welfare intervention

- Cultural criminology – promising for providing a rich account of agency, choices, pleasure & resistance.
- Edgework – Stephen Lyng (1990, 2004).
- Subterranean structuration - Alex Stevens (2011)

Snapshot view of use of theoretical tools

- Semi-structured interviews with 40 dependent female mostly crack & heroin users in 3 English cities in the UK.
- Revisiting old data – applying a new and different framework

Pleasure silenced in official discourse

- Disease model continues to shape drug policy - strips drug taking of pleasurable & social dimensions (O'Malley and Valverde 2004).
- Cultural criminology – offers challenge to discourse
- Explores pleasure, excitement, status, distinction & prowess (usually male) derive

Pleasure & pain

- Why & how do women experience use as pleasurable & extent contributes to their autonomy, empowerment & well-being (Ettorre 1992).
- Does not mean pain, misery, violence & illness has to be obscured.
- Understanding of pleasure - provide deeper insight into why pain endured.

40 female drug users

- **Crime and/or prostitution to support their habits – misery, constant stress and anxiety, painful withdrawal**
- **‘Grafting’ hard work**
- **Physical injuries - violence within the ‘drug scene’.**
- **Abusive relationships**
- **Sex work -severe physical & sexual violence.**
- **Imprisonment**
- **Isolated from friends and family**
- **Physical illnesses**
- **Homelessness**
- **Separation from or the loss of custody of their children.**

- I'm not happy where I am. I don't enjoy using anymore. I hate myself every time I spend my last tenner on a stone. I fucking hate myself...it's like when I look at my past up until about 27 my memories are in colour since then my memories are all sort of grey. Sky aged 52.

- Disease model & focus on recovery in policy discourse dependent on construction of drug use as negative & user as an irrational & irresponsible choice maker who needs help with their disordered, irrational way of thinking (Du Rose 2015).
- Explore pleasurable aspects brings questions of recovery & relapse into sharper focus.

Cultural criminology

- ‘Currents of carnivalesque, excitement, pleasure, & risk-taking that animate everyday life’ in response to & as an expression of a consumerist late modern culture (Ferrell 1995).
- Emotions, sensations, meanings & identities that are produced in day-to-day transgressions.

Subterranean structuration (Stevens 2011)

- Make use of values hidden under surface of late modern capitalism to fashion a life which meets needs for pleasure, status & meaning
- Objects of exchange & identification
- People use to create a life story
- Drug lifestyle - combine mainstream values with subterranean values.

Shop lifting, sex work, etc.

- More lucrative than legitimate work
- A way out of poverty
- A route to independence
- A way to demonstrate their money making expertise.

Out of nothing they can become somebody

- Illicit market a space where most vulnerable people can find purpose & company, comfort, social distinction & excitement.
- Can display their worth, prowess & identity.
- Edgework - The transcendent thrill of putting oneself in harms way & surviving it through skill (Lyng 2005).

Variety of pleasures

- Forgetting everything
- Wealth
- Adventure
- Excitement
- Comfort
- Status
- Sense of belonging
- Sense of autonomy
- Self-determination
- Prowess/skill
- Resisting (gendered) oppression
- Staying in control of their lives

- I phoned up the dealer to score and he said to come to a big house...I had always stayed away from crack houses before. Steve hadn't been a great boyfriend but he was always there and I hated being on my own, and sleeping on my own and that. So I ended up staying there through the night, and smoking rock with them and everything, and then the next morning they turned round and said, oh, you owe us £800 now, and you've got 24 hours to pay it...And the way they work is that they give you a load of rock and then basically you can't afford to pay it back and so they get you on the game... (Sonya aged 24)

- N- Intentionally get women on the game?
- Yes, I've seen girls. So I thought, no, I'm not going to let this happen. So I did a few, you know, I was going into the Co-op and walking out with two DVD players, CD reader/writer DVD players and things like that. I just went on a bit of a mad day, but at the end of the day I actually had a grand, so I had money for me and I paid them back their £800. They had a lot of respect for me though for doing it. From then on it was like, he [boyfriend] was away for five days and I hung around with them....They all had their black girlfriends who didn't take drugs, and they looked after them, and they had their white ones who were treated like pieces of shit, and took drugs, and they had them out on the game. If you were white it was quite hard to gain their respect as they really had no respect for white women. And then, like I said, a lot of them tried getting me on the game, and in the end I did, I suppose, have a bit of respect off them because, you know, I'd be more of a challenge to them. You know, we'll break her one day sort of thing. Sonya aged 24.

- Multiple potential harms
- Adeptly court one risk to subvert another.
- Rather risk arrest & crim. justice proceedings than subjection to male dom. & sexual exploitation.
- Prominent popular images of drug inv. women as desperate & degraded - accomplishment avoided
- Pleasure of self-determination & periodically challenges literal strictures of oppressed position.
- Still exploited

- A snapshot view of dependent women's agency, pleasure & self-determination
- Adaptive experiences of women who are victims

Constructions of female drug users & feminist challenge

- Pathology & powerless
- Rosenbaum (1981) *Women on Heroin*.
- Feminist criminologists attempted to provide empowering accounts of female users.
- Agency, autonomy & resistance to oppressive social structures (e.g. Taylor 1993, Campbell 2000, Anderson 2008).
- Navigating a path beyond dualistic constructions - 'bad' or 'mad', criminal or sick, villain or victim.

I think the crowd that I was hanging around with...because I could see what money they were making and how...to me it was sort of like glamorous in a way. It's sad to say but that's how I saw it you know. And I wanted to be like that and I wanted to be accepted. Lara aged 23.