

Keep your bra and burn your brain?

The research which is helping to lever feminism out of its '60s time trap

TALKING WITH and being with, the kind of young woman drug user who *doesn't* attend drug services led me in the last issue of *Druglink*¹ to call for a more integrated approach to gender in the drugs field, one in which the roles of femininity and masculinity are taken into account.

The gender issue has been addressed mainly through feminist input into the literature and service provision. Drawing on my own research, I argued that much of this input is now out of sync with everyday life, especially when it comes to today's young drugtakers. In this article I examine the research more closely. Though (perhaps, because) they rarely cross the thresholds of drug services, the young women I spoke to have some important messages for service providers.

Interviews with 30 young women aged from 15 to 25 (see panel for more on methodology) formed the project's core data. Contacted by a range of methods, only three of the 30 had been to a drug service for help and advice. Sixteen had been in the dance and drugs 'scene' for at least two years, five for less than a year.

Two of the women had never experimented with drugs and one had tried ecstasy and amphetamine only once. The rest had all been through periods of weekly use of various permutations of ecstasy, LSD and/or amphetamine ranging from three months to three years. Eight had stopped taking these drugs entirely at the time of interview and seven were using less often. Only one had stopped going to clubs. All but three smoked cigarettes, most since the age of 14 or younger. Most had also drunk alcohol at a similarly young age and moved on to experiment with cannabis within two years.

Within two years of trying cannabis, just over half the sample were taking LSD, ecstasy and amphetamine. For some, a 'sweet shop' approach to drug experimentation – 'I'll try anything once', 'I'll always want to get just that bit more wasted' – clearly hastened their progress.

Were they universally introduced to

illegal drugtaking by the men in their lives? Emphatically not. Roughly half (14) had first accessed drugs through a mixed-sex group of friends. Of the remainder, half had been initiated by other women/girls and half by males (mainly boyfriends).

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Their drug use formed an important part of what for them was a highly valued part of their lives. They found it difficult to separate out the elements of the dance/drugs experience – music, drugs, dancing, togetherness – and ascribe to one greater importance. Sounds and body language rather than words were the most common responses to being asked to describe the experience.

Where words were forthcoming, some

by

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Research involving in-depth interviews with young women using drugs in the club scene who do not attend drug services suggests it would be counterproductive and inaccurate to apply unmodified feminist analyses of the '60s and '70s to their lives or to their drug use. Services seeking to establish a fruitful relationship with this group will need to appreciate that, for them, being female does not preclude sexual equality and independence and avoid seeing them solely as victims of male sexual oppression.

gave slightly more weight to the drugs, others said 'music is the drug', and still others spoke of 'dancing on the notes' when on ecstasy. 'Feeling like you belong' and the degree of nonverbal communication possible also figured high on the list of desirable elements. Even the two non-users, who talked ecstatically about the pleasures of the 'scene', emphasised the central role of 'buzzing off' other people's drug use.

Sexuality without sex?

One drug effect was frequently cited as adding to the appeal of the dance club atmosphere for the young women. This was the contribution of drugs to an environment in which 'copping off' – finding someone to have sex with – was not a primary goal either for the women or the men. Although by no means universal, this effect on men's behaviour seemed one of a range of factors (including the women's own drug use) which enhanced the young women's confidence in their physical abilities and in their abilities as actors in a social world.

The dance club setting offered these young women a social space in which to explore a range of sensual and sexualized pleasures, yet one in which pursuing sex or being pursued for sex was downplayed. Lack of active interest in sex often appeared to accompany periods of heavy club-going and 'dance drug' use.

This doesn't mean these women were sexually naive or disinterested. Most felt women should enjoy sex and be able to have casual sex on the same terms as men. Often their sexual activities were curtailed by a concern that promiscuity involved unacceptable risks. AIDS figured so strongly among these that there was a general commitment to using condoms. Four young women volunteered that they had undergone an HIV test despite no obvious risk factors.

New youth cultures constantly recycle elements – styles, music, drugs – from the '60s, but today's young drugtakers operate in a very different social landscape. Among

other changes, jobs (or, the traditional 'career' route for women, eligible men with jobs) no longer grow on trees. Full employment and all the expectations of the future this entails used to be a fact of life for the bright young things of the '60s. You could always get a job if or when you tired of trying to beat the system. 'Opting out' could usually be followed by 'opting in'; the teenage 'phase' ended by the assumption of a job, a home, even a family.

Equality and ambition

Expectations today are very different. For the first time since the Second World War most parents cannot automatically expect their children to have better opportunities than they had, and most teenagers would find it hard to believe in an ever-improving future. At the same time, the scale and scope of consumer culture have expanded almost beyond recognition, playing an ever-increasing role in defining our lifestyles and aspirations.

Against this gloomy economic backdrop, these young women were surprisingly resilient, confident and assertive, with high aspirations – but not of the traditional kind. Even in their mid-20s, many still lived with friends, on their own or with their parent(s), suggesting that the old female story of romance, marriage and the kitchen sink held

Research methods

This article is based on a two-year research and development project completed in October 1993. Based in Manchester and funded by the North West Regional Health Authority, it focused on the 'dance drug' phenomenon. Three hundred and four young women and 70 young men aged 15-25 living and (typically) 'club-drugging' in the north west of England participated in the research.

The core data was my 30 taped in-depth individual interviews. These were accompanied by a lifestyle questionnaire and covered: drug, clubbing and sex 'careers'; attitudes to sex and AIDS; effects of drug use; and self-concept. Supplementary project data included a small study of ecstasy use (103 subjects), an evaluation of Lifeline's young people's information materials, field notes and participant observation diaries, taped interviews in which key young women interviewed their peers, plus background discussions with six individuals and two groups.



This postcard's message is that abandoning feminist fundamentalism means the return of the bimbo. But for today's young women, 'wearing bras' can go with sexual equality and a far from frazzled brain

limited appeal as *the* option for the future. 'Finding Mr Right' did feature among the dreams and aspirations of some but they all, whether unemployed, working, or in full-time education, often dreamed of achieving personal fulfilment in a range of social spheres.

Among these dreams were a good job – not any job, but one conferring status, responsibility and interest – and foreign holidays/travel – not as a lethargic break from dull routine, but as an opportunity to broaden their horizons and develop as independent adults. Becoming *dependent* – on men, employers, the state, or anything else – was not part of their vision of the future. Their determination to make their own opportunities, and confidence in their abilities to do so and enjoy what the world has to offer, was remarkable.

From a variety of sources, feminist ideas had been incorporated into their daily lives and their ways of thinking and feeling about themselves and about men. Economic decline, which might have been expected only to diminish their sense of power and self-worth, appears if anything to have had the opposite effect. The wasting away of manufacturing and 'male' jobs and the upsurge in 'female' service industry jobs has contributed to a further shake-up in traditional gender roles and behaviours. Even if they wanted to be dependent on a male earner, one might be hard to find.

These shifts in the ideological and economic basis of inequality mean '60s-style consciousness-raising does not appeal to these young women – they feel they're already there, though not in ways all older feminists would recognise or appreciate.

Through feminist spectacles

Perspectives born of the youth cultures of the 1960s need revising in the light of these and other changes. Feminist perspectives are no exception. Although published in 1983, Betty Friedan's very popular book, *The Feminine Mystique*, typified and reinforced the perspectives of '60s feminism.

It described how manufacturers and advertisers in the post-war period tempted the women of the West to want more consumer goods for their homes. By seducing them into believing they could express their femininity and individuality through housework and purchasing consumer goods, this "feminine mystique ... proclaimed full feminine achievement was to be found in being wife and mother". The result was to keep women in a socially dependent position and stop them seeking to determine their own lives and identities.

The key to self-determination or, as Friedan put it, to "growing up", was the women's movement. When in the early days of this movement women burnt their bras, symbolically they were casting off 'repressive' and 'false' consumer identities as well as male prescriptions of womanhood. This critique of consumer capitalism as a repressive force in female life underpinned the view that female drug dependence is a direct result of female social dependence; women were 'sold additions' as a means of keeping them down.²

How would the confident and generally positive young women encountered in my research appear through the spectacles of this brand of feminism?

An extreme application of Friedan's anti-consumerist analysis would conclude that the consumerist dance-drugs phenomenon was merely another version of the 'opium of the people' – young people being lulled into accepting poor social conditions instead of trying to change them.

If the phenomenon were deemed worthy of further analysis at all, this would emphasise features which seemingly support the view that women are oppressed and unable to be their 'real' selves, and that consumer culture is one of the main ways this oppression is maintained. Looming large would be instances of young women being introduced

Some initial guidelines for service providers

Though too early to make specific response recommendations, there are clearly some attitudes/assumptions which would be counterproductive for service providers attempting to reach the kind of young drugtaker I researched, and some others that would at least help to establish channels of communication.

- Don't assume young women on the dance drugs scene are merely taking an escapist route from grinding deprivation and/or one that leads to addiction.
- Understand that for many the fun and the drugs are merged in a positive reality, not an escape from reality.
- Don't automatically assume that their way of being female means they have buckled

under to the male agenda of what women should look/be like, or that these young women are victims/oppressed. Encouraging them to understand themselves in these terms could be counterproductive.

- Appreciate that many of these women see themselves as independent, confident and in control and that they are by no means universally bound into drugs/prostitution/domestic drudgery and damaging relations with men. Question feminist dogma.
- Consumer information rather than counselling or treatment could well be their primary service need.

to drugs and duped by DJs or older boy-friends, or using their looks to get free drugs, free club entry, etc. Seized upon too would be the sexualized images of women on club flyers and flirtatious behaviour on the dance floor.

The seemingly uncritical devotion of some young women to the latest fashions and styles (especially since these incorporate the looks of the '60s and '70s which women's liberation reacted against) would certainly be noted. The hair, the make-up, the skimpy clothes, add up to a feminine look which could suggest these women have also fallen victim to the restricted set of '60s female social options.

From the 'feminine mystique' viewpoint, these young women are slaves both to the fashion industry and to traditional femininity. Nothing's changed, would be the conclusion – youth culture is still merely a means of managing the transition from childhood to motherhood and domesticity. A postcard doing the rounds in recent years, *Post-feminism – keep your bra and burn your brain*, inferring that a review of feminist fundamentalism was tantamount to the return of the bimbo, illustrates this point of view. From this kind of feminist perspective, young dance/drug devotees definitely do seem to be 'burning their brains' and not 'their bras'.

Another example of the gulf between dominant feminist analyses and today's young can be found in the 1984 *Prevention* report from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. "The potential contributions to drug prevention of women's consciousness-raising and self-help within the context of the women's movement ... are areas deserving closer study."

It is difficult to imagine how joining consciousness-raising groups could ever have been seen as a form of drug prevention – even more difficult to see it rating higher than Cliff Richard at a rave with the young women I studied.

Such views are an inadequate basis for developing service/policy responses to many of today's young female drug users. The young women in question tend to be averse to feminist fundamentalism and embrace forms of femininity (bras included) which definitely transgress the orthodox feminist norm. It is patronising and alienating to dismiss their energy and sense of independence and adventure as 'false' or transient. The gulf between current drug service provision and the fabric of these young women's lives and needs can only be deepened by such an approach.

Unrepentant consumers

Consumerism is an important aspect of the youth drugtaking phenomenon. Drugs feature, at least in part, as fashion, as part of the leisure and media industries. Taking this seriously, seeing how it shapes the options available to young people, is important. Dismissing or belittling it is bound to create mutual alienation.

Social deprivation remains a major influence on drug use but is not a total explanation, especially of today's 'recreational' use patterns. Even for the most socially deprived, consumer culture defines not only what we lack, but also our dreams and aspirations. Be it the theatre or a video, billboards or TV ads, buying, selling, stealing, desiring or simply watching, the activities and icons of consumer cultures are part of the fabric of everyday life.

Consumerism is not only a major source of personal identity but an arena within which active personal choices are made – for young people, far more real than the worlds of policy and service provision which target them. For us to ignore this would be foolhardy.

The 'dance drug' phenomenon (infinitely bound up in consumerism) has been a significant motor to expansion in drug markets. We now have a mainstream youth culture within which drugtaking is the norm. The drug cultures of the 1960s bequeathed us a legion of professionals whose careers have not suffered greatly due to recreational drug use, but also many regular users of drug services. Today's youth drugtaking boom will also have its casualties – both now and in the longer term. Today's responses could be crucial.

Fashioning a response

How do we ensure that those for whom drugs are a fashion accessory or an adjunct to fun do not progress their drug careers? That living for the weekend does not become living only for drugs? That pill-popping and smoking do not turn into injecting? That young injectors do not take out a 'retirement option' in the shape of a 'legal opiate bubble'?

These important questions are yet to be adequately addressed, but there are some obvious initial guidelines – dos and don'ts for service providers (see panel). Most of all, it is important to realise that young women are as much a part of the dance drugs phenomenon as their male peers. Viewing them *only* as victims of consumerism, men's power, social deprivation, etc, could be a damaging response – it is often far from what goes on in their heads, their hopes and aspirations, the positive choices they make. Viewing young men as representative of young people as a whole, as all jack-the-lads or male oppressors, is equally inadequate – but research in this area is even less evident.

'Keeping your bra' does not necessarily mean 'burning your brain'. ■

1. Henderson S. "Time for a make-over." *Druglink*: 1993, 8(5), p.14-16.
2. Kilbourne J. "The spirit of the Czar: selling addictions to women." In: Roth P. ed. *Alcohol and drugs are women's issues too! A review of the issues*. US NIDA, 1986.
3. Gilman M. "No more junkie heroes?" *Druglink*: 1992, 7(3), p.16.