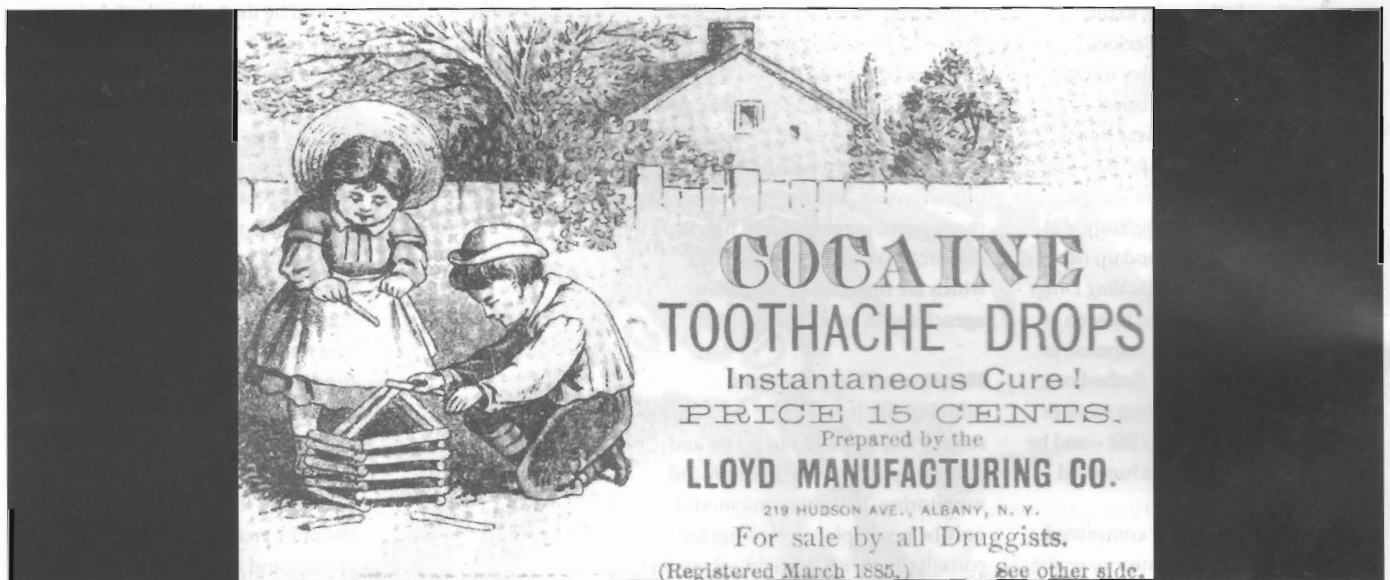


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Reading between the lines

Is cocaine becoming the stimulant of choice for urban youth?



Recent concerns about hard drug use among young people have focussed on whether the UK is experiencing a new heroin epidemic with particular concern that the new heroin user is younger than ever.^{1,2} While exploring this contention in a London context, we found that we lacked the evidence to clearly support or refute it. However, what did emerge from our data was unexpected. Both anecdotal and more systematic evidence suggests that among young recreational drug users in London, heroin use is still marginalised. However, where cocaine is concerned, availability seems to be far higher and attitudes towards the drug are very different.

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To some extent this finding is not surprising nor in conflict with the conclusions of Parker and colleagues. We all know that patterns of drug use vary dramatically across the country, yet too often this fact is ignored when current trends in drug consumption are discussed. In consequence, policy responses are frequently geared to what is seen as the 'new threat' and applied uniformly across the country regardless of whether or not they are appropriate to local needs.

In data from London, there is still scant evidence that heroin use is increasing among young recreational drug users. We are currently studying the patterns of substance use of a group of 350 recreational drug users aged between 16 and 22. This sample has been recruited via snowballing, using stringent criteria to minimise bias, and a team of 20 peer interviewers have gathered the data

through face-to-face interviews. Preliminary analysis of this data has revealed some surprising and sometimes worrying results. While the lifetime prevalence of heroin is small, (about one per cent, the UK norm) around half of those interviewed said that they had tried cocaine – roughly the same proportion as had tried ecstasy (48 per cent) or amphetamines (52 per cent). These findings are supported by data from another National Addiction Centre study of 15-6 year old school excludees, a group thought to be at high risk of substance use.³ Here, nine per cent had tried cocaine powder and a striking one in three had been present when others had used it. However, even among this marginalised group, the prevalence of heroin use was very similar to the national norm. If these studies prove to indicate an increase in the

popularity of cocaine use by young people in the capital, this could be a cause for concern. At present, of course, we lack the epidemiological systems to allow reliable identification or confirmation of such theories.

The clubber upper

The fear of course is that cocaine powder has always had a high caché among recreational drug users – and its falling price (while purity remains pretty constant) may have opened up the market. While cocaine powder typically retails at £50-65 per gram,⁴ anecdotal accounts suggest that at least within London, cocaine powder is often available in half gram measures for as little as £20. This puts it well within the reach of many people who are looking for a reliable clubber upper.

Our concern is that while much vital educational work has been undertaken in clubs, work in this area has mainly centred on the use of ecstasy and amphetamines with little emphasis on cocaine. When such messages are internalised by young people, there is a real possibility that this can influence the types of stimulants used rather than discouraging use altogether.⁵

Historically, British research has tended to regard the use of cocaine powder as polarised between two groups: marginalised injecting drug users or a fashionable and affluent elite. The possibility of use by young people in their teens and early twenties has largely been overlooked. In conducting our research, our assumption has been that in comparison with ecstasy and amphetamines, young people will view cocaine as inherently more risky and expensive, and that this will constrain their use of it.

Consequently we would expect those who use cocaine to perhaps have larger disposable incomes and to have already experimented with a range of other drugs. Some of the cocaine users in our sample did indeed have previous histories of ecstasy or amphetamine use and had recently switched to cocaine in preference. However, a surprising finding was that for a significant number of other cocaine users, the only additional illicit substance that they had ever tried was cannabis.



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Using and choosing

In the following excerpts from our data, we describe some possible reasons for this by exploring the views and experiences of several interviewees. To preserve anonymity all names have been changed.

Ali is a 22 year old Bangladeshi male who lives with his family in East London. He has been smoking cannabis since he was 15 years old and currently uses it about three times a week. He has been using cocaine powder intermittently for the last three years and at the moment he estimates that he uses a gram two or three times

a month. He has never used amphetamines, ecstasy or LSD and has little interest in these drugs.

Lucy is a 17 year old living in London with her parents. She has been smoking cannabis and drinking alcohol since she was fourteen and tried cocaine for the first time last year. She has never tried ecstasy, amphetamines or LSD as she regards them as much more dangerous and likely to cause problems than cocaine powder.

The patterns of use described by these two young people were unexpected. They both seem to have been influenced by the belief that using cocaine powder is safer in a number of ways than other types of drug use. These views were common among the sample group, even among those who had a history of using a range of substances.

Jo and Shelly aged 21 and 16, are both from London and live with their parents. Jo is working as a full time secretary. She used to use ecstasy and amphetamines but has recently given these up in preference for cocaine powder which she uses about once a week. She also smokes cannabis. When she takes cocaine she usually snorts it, but will occasionally smoke a joint with some powder in it if her friends offer it to her. However, she has never smoked crack cocaine as she views it as much more dangerous and more akin to heroin.

Shelly's experiences of drug use are not so widespread. She is still at school and has only experienced cannabis and cocaine. She first started using cocaine powder about 6 months ago when some friends she was with offered her some in a pub. She now uses about half a gram every week when she goes out on a Friday or Saturday evening. She and her close friends all snort it, but she knows quite a few boys who smoke cocaine powder in joints too.

Both these young women have made conscious decisions to use cocaine in preference to other stimulants such as ecstasy or amphetamines. In Jo's case she has decided to stop using other stimulant drugs. We asked her why she has stopped taking ecstasy. She replied:

Just cos its dangerous and you see all these things about it... With 'charlie' you can control the amount going into your

Not only is cocaine seen as a fashionable accessory to a desirable lifestyle, its effects are viewed as more subtle and easier to control than those associated with ecstasy and speed. These seem to be attractive credentials for any drug in an image-conscious age

body and you can control the amount of buzzing you get on it because you put it in gradually, whereas people feel that if you put an 'e' in your system then that's it – you can't stop it, you can't do nothing.

Unlike Jo, Shelly has never tried ecstasy nor does she intend to in the future. Her views mirror those expressed by Jo:

I just think 'e' messes up your mind. I've never took it and I'm not intending to take it cos it gives you a buzz – my friend has took it and she said it gives you a buzz but then it has different effects on other people. But with cocaine it's like different – it's not that it's good for you but it's not bad for you like ecstasy – that might give you a bigger buzz but then it might give you a bad buzz, but with cocaine you know what you're doing.

Both these young women have 'successfully' assimilated the messages that ecstasy use can be damaging. Furthermore, experiential or peer learning has established the belief that the effects from an ecstasy tablet can be unpredictable, long lasting and sometimes unpleasant. In comparison, cocaine is seen as a relatively safe, predictable and reliable substitute.

If this is the case, one might assume that amphetamines would be perceived as a suitable substitute for an increasingly demonised ecstasy. For some, this was the case, however for others, the long lasting effects and negative after-effects associated with speed had deterred use.

In addition to these observations, many of the recreational drug users we spoke to saw amphetamines as much less fashionable than cocaine. For image-conscious young people, this may also be a strong incentive to choose cocaine over and above other more obvious stimulants. Jo sums this up:

Well speed ain't really the same type of buzz as cocaine but it helps you do the same types of things like stay less drunk or whatever, and stay awake for longer . . . With speed you get such a bad come down. It's so depressing . . . and you just look like shit and your skin goes all horrible . . . But the thing is it's not trendy – it's like a poor man's drug.

To a naive observer, the fact that a drug lasts longer might seem to make it more attractive. However, views differ. Our data suggested that speed's long-lasting actions were sometimes seen as negative, as Jo went on to explain:

It makes you stay awake too long and it's frustrating if you take it and you try to go to sleep and you can't. Whereas with cocaine it keeps you awake but by the time you get home you've had so much to drink without even realising it that you're normally tired or you just go to sleep.

It seems that cocaine has certain properties which makes it an attractive choice of stimulant for this group of young people. These reasons include its predictable nature, that dosing is more easily controlled by the user and, in comparison with amphetamines, its effects are less intense and shorter lived.

In addition to having more attractive pharmacological properties, cocaine's reputation as an expensive elitist drug was frequently mentioned as an attraction to the young user. Expensive designer clothes and accessories have become more and more popular with this young age group and it seems that cocaine fits into this overall image. As two other young women told us:

The thing about the majority of people I know who use cocaine, is that they're like seen to be trendy, got money, got all the best designer clothes. Just like pretend to be more richer than what they are. It's just

like a fashion and its trendy. (female, aged 19)

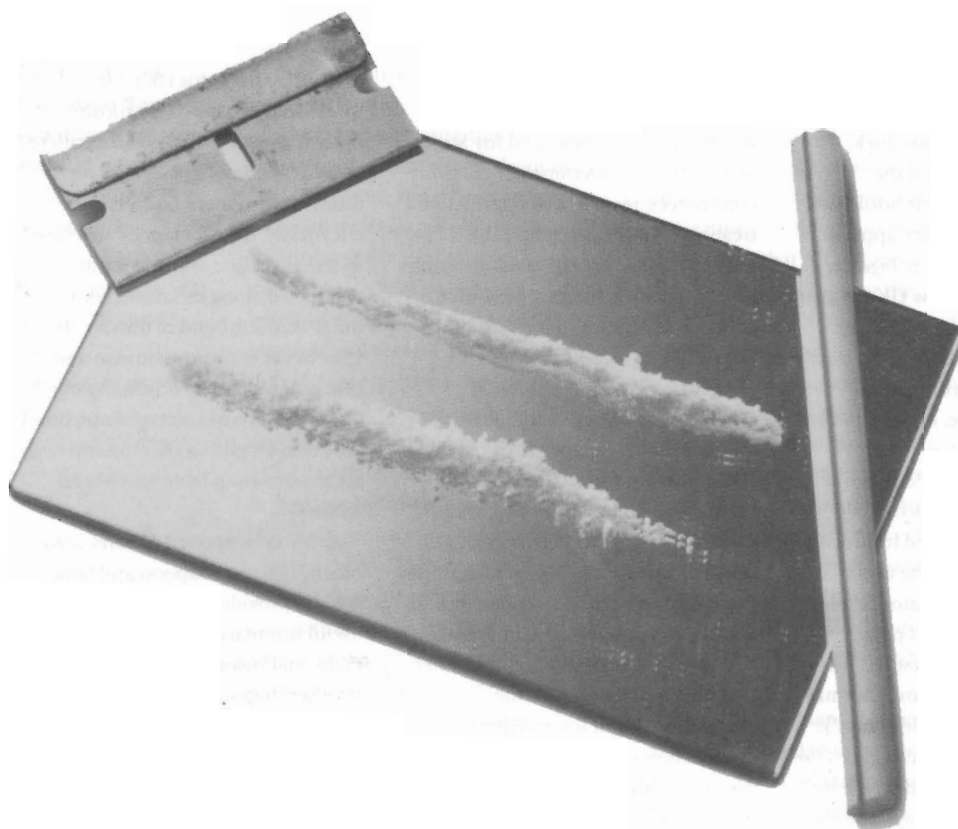
There's a lot of boys who take it to act flash. When they go out they wear all the Versace and Moschino and that just to act flash and they smoke 'charlie' round girls so that they can smell it and look at 'em . . . Charlie is really like fashion now. (female, aged 19)

Crackdown

In general our respondents seemed to regard crack cocaine in a very different light. Although it was not uncommon for people to report smoking cocaine, this tended to refer to putting small quantities of the powder into joints. (It should be noted that this is a highly inefficient method of consuming the drug, as the majority of the active ingredients will break down at high temperatures.⁶) Studies have consistently shown that the prevalence of crack use among young people is far lower than that for powder cocaine. The majority of young people interviewed had very negative attitudes towards crack, regarding it as very similar to heroin in terms of 'dangerousness' and its addictive potential. As one young man commented:

Crack is just not acceptable; everyone knows it's the most addictive type of drug you can start taking and people go to any type of lengths to get it once they're hooked on it. I just wouldn't want to be seen as a crackhead cos crackheads normally do like some pretty disgusting things . . . Heroin's a no-no – it's exactly the same as crack.

Such differentiation between crack cocaine and cocaine powder is encouraging. After all, it suggests that the form of cocaine most associated with negative consequences is unattractive to this group of drug users. However, the concern exists that if use of cocaine powder becomes increasingly acceptable, this may increase the likelihood that some users will progress to using the drug by more harmful routes. In fact, limited evidence within our sample suggested that the distinction between cocaine and crack use may already be becoming more blurred for some. For example, respondents suggested that some young people differentiate between buying crack (which has highly negative connotations) and preparing it themselves from cocaine powder.



What is commonly overlooked in discussions about substance use is that drugs are often selected according to the *function* which the user wishes them to fulfil



Don't panic!

We are not trying to suggest that the UK is on the verge of a nationwide cocaine epidemic. Rather we are making the more modest point that patterns of drug consumption are complex and require close scrutiny if we are to be in a position to respond appropriately to future challenges. If young people in urban areas are using more cocaine, we should be asking ourselves how best to monitor these changes and assess their likely consequences.

Our work suggests that young people make active decisions about the drugs they select to use or not use. Trying to increase our understanding of the rationale which underlies these decision-making processes could make a useful contribution to attempts to design effective harm reduction or preventative interventions.

For instance, the young people in our study assimilated messages from a variety of sources, but the processes involved in the evaluation and interpretation of these messages

seemed complex. Similarly, substance choices did not seem to hinge solely on cost, availability or 'peer pressure', yet all of these factors may have a degree of influence. What is commonly overlooked in discussions about substance use is that drugs are often selected according to the *function* which the user wishes them to fulfil. Drugs with similar pharmacological effects may be swapped to fulfil the same functions. For example, one of our respondents compared their reasons for using alcohol with those for cocaine:

I mean, they both give you confidence and they both like give you that boost so that you fancy going out dancing all night or you fancy going out and meeting new people or going out on the pull. It gives you confidence to go up and approach people and you just think you look ultra sexy on it all the time!

However, as we have suggested, there is increasing evidence that cocaine may be becoming a popular choice for young drug users in the capital, who worry about the quality of and dangers associated with ecstasy, and who regard amphetamines as a poor substitute. Not only is cocaine seen as a fashionable accessory to an affluent and desirable lifestyle, its effects are viewed as more subtle and easier to control. These seem to be attractive credentials for any drug in an image conscious age.

In all our work, we should not be trapped into focusing on one particular drug. Considerable attention has been directed at the dangers of ecstasy and enforcement strategies have arguably influenced both the quality and quantity of ecstasy available in the UK market. But young people appear to use stimulant drugs with clear functional purposes in mind – discouraging ecstasy use may be just as likely to encourage the substitutional use of an alternative stimulant as it is to lead to abstinence all together. Such substitution may have either positive or negative consequences for the health and well being of the young people concerned. If prevention activities are to be effective, we need to understand more about the broad spectrum of substances that young people use and the rules and meanings that shape decisions concerning the use of a particular substance. ■

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