

Ketamine: The Divisive Dissociative. A Discourse Analysis of the Constructions of Ketamine by Participants of a Free Party (Rave) Scene

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Abstract

This article examines the multiple and contradictory understandings that participants of a free party (rave) scene in the South West of England drew upon when talking about ketamine, and the role of these understandings in identity and consumption practices. The data is drawn from 19 semi-structured interviews and one focus group conducted in two phases over a period of 17 months with participants associated with a particular sound system. The data was analysed using discourse analysis, identifying three interpretative repertoires namely ‘communality and sociality’, ‘ketamine as alien invader’, and ‘rights and pleasures of extreme intoxication’. Different understandings of ketamine were used to articulate a contradictory set of values about the free party scene, and drawn upon to negotiate the heterogeneity of this scene. This also entailed the negotiation of wider neo-liberal discourses around individual rights and freedoms to consume, and individual regulation and responsibility for these freedoms.

Keywords: *Ketamine, free party, consumption, neo-liberalism, discourse analysis*

Introduction

This article examines the role of drugs in (sub)cultural identity and consumption practices by analysing the multiple and potentially contradictory understandings that participants in ‘free parties’ drew upon when talking about ketamine. Free parties may briefly be described as unregulated illegal outdoor or squat parties using mobile sound systems to play amplified repetitive beats. While free party scenes are heterogeneous and specific (in relation to context and location) they share features that are broadly in evidence across electronic dance

culture (EDC). The free party scene that forms the focus of this article is informed by features specific to its location in the rural South West of England, however, like many other club and dance cultures it includes an atmosphere of social and communal togetherness; a stress on collectiveness; the sense of a protected space that is vulnerable to invasion by outsiders; and a celebration of the rights and pleasures of hedonism and intoxication (see Thornton 1995; Rietveld 1998; Malbon 1999; Reynolds 1999; and Measham et al. 2001 for discussions of these aspects of EDC scenes).

Ketamine: a brief overview

Ketamine has been present on the rave and dance scene for some time, although an increase in the overt consumption of ketamine in sections of this scene over the past decade means that ketamine is now included in a broad repertoire of dance drugs alongside ecstasy and other amphetamines, stimulants and hallucinogens (Moore and Miles 2004). Taken in small doses ketamine works to depress the nervous system resulting in a temporary loss of bodily sensation accompanied by perceptual changes or hallucinations (Shapiro 1992; Copeland and Dillon 2005). Physical side-effects include diminished physical co-ordination, and may include nausea, vomiting and blurring of speech and vision (Shapiro 1992). The dissociative effects of ketamine lead to users experiencing a sense of detachment from their physical surroundings often resulting in a 'floating' feeling (Copeland and Dillon 2005). Higher doses severely impair movement and can result in complete physical paralysis, an inability to communicate and powerful hallucinations (Shapiro 1992), an experience often described by users as entering the 'k-hole' (Dillon et al. 2003).

Arguably, this extreme dissociation is often sought by users, as evidenced by Dillon et al. (2003) study in which ketamine users reported positive associations with physical and psychological side-effects traditionally perceived negatively in other kinds of drug use. While these kinds of experiences may meet only a limited number of personal tastes, such active seeking out of extreme intoxication has been identified in other research (e.g. Measham and Brain's conceptualisation of 'controlled loss of control' in relation to alcohol consumption: 2005, p. 273). While mixing ketamine with alcohol and other drugs poses a significant risk to users,¹ the dangers of ketamine are most often identified in relation to the combined aspects of user vulnerability (due to impaired movement and confusion) and setting (Jansen 1993; in Copeland and Dillon 2005). The interaction between effect and setting may, for instance, leave users vulnerable to inclement weather, accidents, theft and attack, including sexual assault and rape (Copeland and Dillon 2005).²

Recreational use of ketamine

The increased recreational use of ketamine has been noted by writers and commentators in a variety of disciplines and forums, including medical and psychopharmacological writing on substance abuse and addiction (Curran and Monaghan 2001); surveys by drug information charities (DrugScope 2005) and drug monitoring units (Independent Drug Monitoring Unit 2002); and a number of articles in the media (UK examples include The Guardian 2005 and The Independent 2005). This commentary has taken place alongside increased attention and action from Government (in the UK for example recent legislation under the Misuse of Drugs Act changed the status of ketamine from an uncontrolled drug to that of a class C drug, with effect from January 2006). However, there remains a paucity of research on user

experiences of ketamine, with the exception of earlier work by Newcombe and Johnson (1999) and work by Moore and Measham (2006).

The use of ketamine at early raves in the 1990s was documented by McDermott in an article for the culturally influential magazine, *The Face*, in which the emergence of ketamine was described as disrupting the 'loved-up' atmosphere created by collective dancing on ecstasy (McDermott 1992). Documenters of the early rave scene have argued that while this scene was never bound by a coherent ideology (Collin 1997), it is associated with psycho-stimulant and poly-drug use, dancing, hedonism and a set of values associated with communality and sociality, summarised in the acronym PLUR (peace, love, unity and respect). These characteristics are more or less emphasised in the different scenes that make up contemporary dance culture, which vary in relation to styles of music, cultural performance and drug use. The trend towards a more obvious use and normalisation of ketamine within some parts of dance culture is one of the significant shifts that has occurred recently (Jansen 2001). In this regard, a growing body of interdisciplinary clubbing research documents the perceived pollution of the loved-up PLUR vibe by new drugs and 'others' who are constructed as culturally problematic, either in terms of the 'type' of person they represent (e.g. mainstream, or 'scallies') or the type of drugs they favour (see e.g. Thornton, 1995; Moore 2003).

Ketamine, neoliberal consumption and EDC

We locate our analysis of the role of dance drugs such as ketamine within the wider social context in which it occurs. In particular we note the rise of consumer society and neo-liberalism which provide a context for the replacement of traditional anchors of identity (such as occupation, family or neighbourhood affiliation) by identities based upon consumption, particularly in relation to lifestyle and leisure (Giddens 1991). Consumption and leisure-based activities have therefore become important tools for indicating identity and expressing personal freedom and sovereignty. The experiences of sovereignty and freedom fostered by practices of consumption are further enabled by a neo-liberal order (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Kelly 2006) in which people are encouraged to see themselves as autonomous, rational, risk-managing beings responsible for their own destinies. Gill (2007, p. 260) describes this in terms of the 'choice biography' which stems from the contemporary injunction to 'render one's life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy – however constrained one might actually be'.

In relation to dance culture, the interactions between consumption and identity practices have been discussed in terms of hedonism and experiential consumption (e.g. Malbon 1999), hierarchies of aesthetics (Thornton 1995; Goulding and Shankar 2004; Hutton 2006); and political activism (Bennett 1999). For example, liking certain types of music, gaining access to particular 'exclusive' clubs, or re-appropriating buildings for the purpose of parties can all be examined as identity practices because these practices allow participants to understand themselves in particular ways. Similarly, free parties, as illegal and unbranded sites of leisure (in comparison to industry sponsored venues and events such as the Carling Academy nightclubs and V Festival) are interesting sites for identity-consumption relations given that they provide greater opportunities for unregulated consumption.

Free parties are illegal raves that take place in isolated rural areas or unlicensed urban settings and comprise mobile sound systems producing 'amplified repetitive beats at a rate of 130–160 beats per minute' (Rietveld 1998, p. 243). Emerging from the rave scene in response to what many saw as the commercialisation of rave in the 1990s, early free parties

were based on an ethos of freedom of expression and access, as well as the creation of social and community initiatives (Rietveld 1998). Contemporary participants describe an ethos of inclusivity in which participation is limited only by the ability to access parties, requiring knowledge of how to find out where parties are, and a means of transport to get there. However, while this ethos precludes deliberate exclusion by free party participants, it is possible that access might also be restricted by factors such as class, ethnicity and sexuality.

Contemporary EDC is characterised by heterogeneity, with some participants moving fluidly between and within scenes, while others more strongly identify with particular fragments of scenes. The free party scene(s) in the South West of England also reflect this heterogeneity and flux, with many distinctions based on musical genres (e.g. techno, psy-trance, drum and bass); locations and settings (city/urban *vs.* forest/rural); and significantly, an extended repertoire of dance drugs including the heightened presence and use of ketamine.

In this article we examine how a group of free party participants talk about ketamine, analysing the different ways ketamine use was described; how these discourses construct the values of this scene; and how they may reflect and engage with contemporary identity-consumption practices. There is an established body of literature on the social and cultural aspects of drug use in dance culture (e.g. Newcombe 1992; Shapiro 1992; Redhead 1993; Thornton 1995; Malbon 1999; and Measham et al. 2001; Pini 2001). By examining the accounts and constructions of ketamine we aim to contribute a social psychological perspective on aspects of ketamine use in relation to consumption, leisure and identity.

Ketamine and the reverberating rhythms study

Design

The research presented in this article forms part of a wider study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ref: RES-000-22-1171) entitled 'Reverberating Rhythms: Social Identity and Political Participation in Clubland'. This study used two case studies (an urban drum & bass scene and a rural free party scene) to address a series of questions regarding contemporary leisure based identity practices. The study employed interviews, focus groups, participant observation and questionnaire methods. Through the use of such methods ketamine use was identified as significant, particularly in the practices and experiences of the free party participants.

Participants. The data presented in this study stems from the analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews; five participant observations at free parties; four follow-up interviews; and one follow-up focus group. These were conducted over a period of 17 months, between November 2005 and August 2007. The demographic breakdown of participants is as follows: two thirds of participants were male with an age range of 20–38 years of age. Fourteen participants identified themselves as 'white British' and one as 'white other'. Just under half identified themselves as employed, although two participants identified themselves as self-employed within the 'other' category for employment (the remaining categories were 'college' and 'unemployed').³ Participant observations conducted at five free parties suggested that participants at these parties can be characterised as predominantly white, heterosexual and male. While our participants are slightly older than the average dance club scene, the overall participant demographics, while not a representative sample,

Table I. Participant demographics and drug use over the past year.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Employment	Ket. Use	Other Drugs							
						S	E	L	C	Ck	M	A	N
Lulu	23	F	WB	C	MW	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Genie	27	F	WO	E	N		•	•	•		•	•	•
Kay	20	F	WB	E	MW	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
Alice	36	F	WB	O (Self-emp)	MW	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Peter	33	M	WB	E	W		•				•	•	•
Jasper	34	M	WB	E	W	•	•				•	•	•
Max	38	M	WB	E	BM	•	•	•				•	•
Stanley	28	M	WB	E	Q	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Steve	26	M	WB	E	M	•	•	•	•		•	•	
Trevor	23	M	WB	O	M		•	•	•		•	•	
NoyZ	28	M	WB	O	MW	•	•	•			•	•	•
Bob	28	M	WB	O (Self-emp)	W	•	•	•				•	•
Colin	31	M	WB	U	W	•	•				•	•	•
Matthew	32	M	WB	U	MW	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Michael	31	M	WB	U	M	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Notes: (1) Ketamine Use: MW, More than once a week; W, Weekly; M, Monthly; Q, Quarterly; BM, Blue Moon; N, Never; (2) Other Drugs: S, Speed; E, Ecstasy; L, LSD; C, Cocaine; Ck, Crack; M, Mushrooms; A, Alcohol; N, Nicotine; (3) Employment: E, Employed; U, Unemployed; C, College; O, Other; (4) Ethnicity: WB, White British; WO, White Other.

correlate with the geo-demographic patterns of this particular scene, based in the rural South West of England. While acid techno is the predominant musical sub-genre in this scene, a range of dance music was heard during participant observations, including drum & bass and soul.

None of the participants were remunerated (interviews were conducted at sites convenient to them), and pseudonyms, chosen by the participants, were used in reports. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on their drug consumption at dance events and free parties over the past year. The questionnaire was adapted from research on dance drug use (Riley et al. 2001; Riley and Hayward 2004) in which participants were asked to indicate their frequency in use of a range of illicit drugs. All but one participant reported using ketamine, while over half of the participants claimed to use ketamine ‘once a week’ or ‘more than once a week’. See Table I for details of participant demographics and patterns of drug use. Like many involved in EDC our participants were polydrug users, however, they differed in comparison to other EDC studies in terms of the prevalence of drugs considered more problematic in EDC, namely, ketamine, crack and heroin.

Procedure. The data collection was focused around one particular sound system ‘Mind Mayhem’ (pseudonym), although participants often went to parties organised by other

systems or collectives. Participants were recruited at free parties associated with Mind Mayhem for later participation and through snow balling techniques.

All participants were interviewed during phase one of the study and a preliminary analysis of this data was brought to nine of the participants for further discussion in phase two (four interviews and one focus group ($N=5$). Rather than being questioned about specific substances, participants were asked about how drugs and alcohol generally affected their experience of free party and dance events. However, despite ketamine not being specifically included on the interview schedule participants consistently raised ketamine as a salient topic. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, it was possible to explore talk about ketamine with participants, and to raise the topic in phase two of the data collection if this seemed pertinent. Interviews and focus group data were transcribed and analysed using discourse analysis (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987; see Appendix for transcription notation).

Despite the participants' relatively high frequency of ketamine use, their talk about ketamine was characterised by tensions and inconsistencies. Discourse analysis is theoretically underpinned by social constructionism which understands that language provides our ways of understanding ourselves and the world, and consequently that meaning is constructed in talk and social interaction (Burr 1995). In discourse analysis contradictory and multiple ways of talking are considered normative and part of everyday sense-making practices (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992). The aim in discourse analysis is not to seek a single 'true' account, rather, this approach emphasises the constitutive and active nature of language and talk. As such, it is concerned with the ways in which meanings are actively constructed in everyday talk; the various ways that an issue can be understood; and the consequences of constructing particular versions of a set of events (Wetherell and Potter 1992). In aiming to look beyond a single objective 'truth', discourse analysis therefore does not analyse participants' accounts as straightforward phenomenological reflections of their experiences, but seeks to highlight the way in which often-contradictory accounts are drawn upon to construct a particular narrative. Discourse analysis therefore allows us to examine how ketamine and ketamine use are variously constructed in our participants' talk, and how these constructions are located in and serve to contextualise a specific EDC scene. It is this emphasis on construction and the consequences thereof that distinguishes discourse analysis from other non-positivist social science approaches.

The particular formulations or linguistic performances used by speakers in the construction of their accounts are known as 'interpretative repertoires' in which 'metaphors, grammatical constructions, [and] figures of speech' (Burr 1995; p. 176) are used in the creation of accounts. Interpretative repertoires may reoccur or be repeated in the construction of a particular topic by different speakers, however, individual speakers may draw upon different or contradictory repertoires at any one time in order to justify or warrant a particular account, or to position themselves and others in particular ways (Burr 1995). Analysts may also examine these recurring ways of talking about a particular topic in terms of how they interact, reproduce or challenge culturally dominant or privileged discourses and practices.

Our analytic procedure drew from methods outlined by (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992), in that we engaged in cycles of coding intended to describe and then conceptualise patterns in participants' talk. Our coding identified three interpretative repertoires that appeared to articulate key meanings that our participants used to make sense of ketamine use at free parties. We entitled these repertoires: 'communality and sociality'; 'ketamine as alien invader'; and the 'rights and pleasures of extreme intoxication'.

Results

Communality and sociality

In our data participants drew on traditional dance culture values of community and sociality, constructing these as central to their experiences of free parties. Participants talked about the importance of being sociable, of actively participating in the event and creating a communal atmosphere. In contrast, ketamine use with its effects of impairing movement and communication was constructed as undermining these values of communality and sociality. For example, in extract one below, ketamine is described as focusing the user internally, creating an individual or isolated experience ('your own reality kind of a trip') resulting in the social and communal activities of dancing and conversation being rendered impossible.

Extract 1: Interview 1 with Trevor

it's a very kind of (...) hhh °not (particularly) selfish° but very much in (.) in your reality kind of trip (...) um (.) and you don't really dance you tend to roll around on the floor (.) or sit and stand I spose (.) conversation after a point tends to go out the window and it doesn't look good.

Extract 2: Interview 1 with Genie

YM: do you have anything to say about ketamine use

Genie: ... I think its k:: killing the free party (.) vibe in fact it takes the vibe away from the party completely and it seems to be (.) possibly now the most common drug at free party

YM: mm

...

Genie: and er I was very wary of it to start with and you've got to try things in life so I tried it (.) and I was alright on it the first time, the second I had I was lying on the floor in my own sick for three hours nearly got run over by someone that was joy riding round the field so yeah I don't speak too highly of it

YM: mm

Genie: um I think it's far too full on a drug it just gets you too off your head

YM: mm

Genie: it's completely irresponsible I mean drug taking's irresponsible but that there's a lot of drugs you can take that you still er in control and it rea::lly really upsets me when I see people that are walking and it's obvious that he's on ketamine cos you lose your coordination cos it's an anaesthetic

YM: mm

Genie: um it really upsets me when I see people when I'm going round the party that are just <off> their heads and can't see how they can enjoy it (.) you can't not talking to anyone [em] you know just passed out on the <bloody> ground horrible that's one of the reasons why I haven't been partying so much cos I find it quite (.) revolting actually .hhh yeah it disgusts me

YM: = yeah a lot of people have spoken about that

Genie: yeah

YM: ketamine and the sort of

Genie: yeah

YM: ruining of the party scene

Genie: = if you go to a party and everyone's on ecstasy it's mu::ch nicer vibe much nicer

YM: mm

Genie: yeah cos everyone's up for it everyone's happy everyone's lovin hugging (.) ketamine's just like blanket over the party

Genie's comments above articulate a clear and impassioned critique of ketamine in terms of its challenge to communality and sociality. EDC has a history of problematising newly

emerging drugs, and in this quote ketamine is constructed as problematic in terms of being too powerful, making the user vulnerable, irresponsible; unsociable (not talking to anyone) and leading to physical impairment and obliteration (passed out). This intense impairment of co-ordination and communication skills is described in negative and extreme terms (as 'horrible', 'upset[ting]' and 'revolting') which work to justify Genie's statement that ketamine use (in comparison to ecstasy use) is killing the scene and ruining the party vibe. While emphasising the importance of community and sociality, both extracts also hint at a discourse on the responsibility for the care of oneself. The expectation of individual self-regulation is evidenced in references to the problematising of the visible loss of control associated with ketamine use (Genie's 'rolling around on the dance floor', 'lying on the floor in my own sick' and Trevor's 'it doesn't look good'), which resonates with broader neoliberal demands on self responsibility and control (Kelly 2006; Gill 2007).

Ketamine the invader 'other'. The positioning of ketamine as challenging traditional party values of communality and sociality enabled a second repertoire, which constructed ketamine as a destructive invader 'other'. The construction of ketamine as a destructive agent, entering and changing the nature of free parties, is more explicitly undertaken in the following extract where it is compared historically to ecstasy-dominated parties.

Extract 4: Interview 1 with Stanley

its [ketamine] had (.) a very definite influence on the tone and nature of parties if you've got a load of people stumbling around as if their legs were (.) kind of (.) in heavy boots and they've got no balance and (.) their eyes are pointing in different directions and no sense comes out of their mouths at all (.) and you've got an entire dance floor (.) an entire dance floor filled with people on ecstasy patting each other and telling each other how much they (.) love each other it seems (..) phh:: like really um (.) industrial and um: a lot of people have said it ruined the party scene

Stanley's comment that ketamine has 'had (.) a very definite influence on the tone and nature of parties' points to the existence of a perceived set of values that participants can draw upon in order to construct a particular version of the free party scene. This construction hinges on situating the scene historically in order to make a distinction between how parties were and how they are now. In this extract the 'tone' and 'nature' of free parties are seen to be constituted by people and the nature of their participation. The nature of this participation is inextricably linked to drugs and, in this instance, to the comparative effects of ecstasy and ketamine, each of which have been seen to culturally epitomise the party scene at different times. The construction of ketamine as alien and negative is achieved by referring to 'a load of people stumbling around' in a leaden unbalanced disconnected and non-sensical way in comparison with 'a dance floor' (denoting community) of loved-up e-heads participating in shared emotion and physicality. In this comparison the atmosphere of community and love that characterised free parties dominated by ecstasy stands in contrast to the 'industrial' nature of parties dominated by ketamine, depicted as a landscape of party-goers physically out of control and alienated from each other.

By framing changes in the scene in this way the participant is able to side-step any individual responsibility for contributing to these changes, and is also able to distance himself from this critique so that 'a lot of people' have blamed ketamine for ruining the scene rather than the participant himself. These repertoires enable ongoing participation in a scene in which the communal and collective sit side-by-side with the individual and disconnected, in this way the person doing the 'othering' is also the 'other' since it was users of ketamine who were constructing ketamine as the 'invader other'. Thus while previous research on

EDC has pointed to the twinned representations of invader others and invader drugs entering the scene (e.g. Moore's (2003) discussion of 'beer monsters'), the advantage of discourse analysis is that we can identify how ketamine is both constructed as 'other' while it is simultaneously consumed by insiders.

The subtle othering of ketamine users that occurs in the extract above is more explicitly undertaken in the following two extracts, again by participants who use ketamine (for example Michael reported monthly use and Colin weekly):

Extract 5: Interview 1 with Michael

people are using it [ketamine] as an excuse (.) some people I think it's this new breed as I say of the clubbers that are coming over .hh as I say ketamine has always been on the party scene you know it's its never been a problem but it's these clubbers that have (.) kind of stepped over maybe >sort of< maybe they've (.) brought ketamine with them um (.) because obviously clubs (.) you've got such a short time to party people want to get as much as they can as quickly as they can .hh and I think that ki- that kind of attitude has been brought over

Extract 6: Interview 1 with Colin

you get a lot of crews who go to the forest parties they go together as a group of people and they're all watching each others backs all the time ya know they're keeping an eye on each other to make sure nothing bad happens yeah and if one of them sort of feeling a bit under the weather or whatever the rest of them will sort of come to the aid and help um and chat to um and you know and get them back on the sort the party vibe you know whereas you know I've noticed at a lot of city parties with a lot of city crews they'll turn up in the car together and then that's it they just won't watch each others backs ya know they'll all go off and do their own thing and ya know you'll find them at four in the morning with ketamised >oh < and they're standing in the freezing cold in a little shirt like <urrrrrrrr> with their mates never ever seeing them ya know so ya know we identify more with ya know more caring sharing kind of community spirit atmosphere

In Extracts 5 and 6 the blame for ruining the free party scene is more directly apportioned to groups of people – clubbers and city crews – who have, respectively, introduced or rendered the use of ketamine problematic in the free party scene. Discursive work on the production of subcultural identities has noted the use of 'othering' to enable claims for subcultural group membership (e.g. Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995; Riley and Cahill 2005) and extract five provides such an example in its distinction between clubbers and partiers.

The observation that clubbers have 'stepped over' into the free party scene works powerfully to convey a sense of a scene that has been invaded. In this regard, a central contradiction in the extract – that 'ketamine has always been on the party scene' without being a problem on the one hand, and that it has been brought over by clubbers on the other, positions clubbers and their different attitudes towards drug use as responsible for ketamine becoming problematic. As with Stanley, in Extract 4 above, the participant (and his use of ketamine) is distanced from any responsibility for changes in the scene, in this case by locating the problem in the types of people who use, rather than the drug itself. This simultaneous acceptance and problematising of ketamine thus enables a successful negotiation of the heterogeneity of the free party scene.

In Extract 6 a strong emphasis is placed on the importance of being part of a group or community and all that this entails. The participant's talk about ketamine works to create a distinction between groups: 'forest crews' and 'city crews'. Forest crews go to free parties in a group and membership and care of this group is maintained by 'watching each others backs all the time' and 'keeping an eye on each other'. Interestingly, no direct reference to ketamine is made in relation to this group, and any harms and risks are minimised by

references to making sure ‘nothing bad happens’ and to the possibility of group members ‘feeling a bit under the weather’. Furthermore, the potential for any risk or harm to a member of the group is averted or rectified by intervention from the group as a whole who take responsibility for ‘chatting’ to the member and ‘getting them back on the party vibe’. This is directly contrasted by the description of the city crew who ‘don’t watch each others backs’ and ‘go off and do their own thing’. Distancing from (and othering of) this group is reinforced by repeatedly locating crews in relation to urban or city spaces (‘city parties’, ‘city crews’) and in references to crews ‘turn[ing] up in a car’. While spending time in cars is a regular activity at free parties, in the context of this extract the reference to turning up in a car seems to emphasise the trailing along of ‘city harshness’ – as opposed to the organicity of forest crews who just ‘go to the forest parties’.

Rights and pleasures of extreme intoxication

The third interpretative repertoire we identified described individual rights to, and the pleasures of, extreme intoxication. While ketamine use was problematised in the first two repertoires described above, in our third repertoire two equally important values were articulated and used to justify ketamine use. These values oriented around a neo-liberal discourse of individual rights and choice (in relation to drug use) and a discourse of the pleasure of extreme intoxication through the consumption of drugs, although this excess was also problematised. For example, in extract seven below both the values of sociality (e.g. ‘dancing’) and the values of individual rights (‘each to their own’) are described and used to evaluate ketamine use at free parties. The pleasures of extreme intoxication are described in Extracts 8, 9 and 10 where the ‘joys’ of taking ketamine are described in terms of getting ‘so:: fucked’ and ‘totally bollocksed’.. It is a sign of the multiplicity and fluidity of use of these discourses, that it is Trevor who critiques excessive use of ketamine at parties in Extract 7 who also describes the ‘joys’ of this kind of use in Extract 8.

Extract 7: Follow-up focus group.

Trevor: It’s got to people that (.) people are going to parties because that’s (.) where they can live out their K habit, not because they want to dance to the music that’s being played.

Stanley: They can’t hear the music or remember any of it.

Alice: I’ve got no problem with that that’s fine cos that’s what the party world’s for

Stanley: Well yeah

Alice: Each to his own

Extract 8: Interview 1 with Trevor.

I’ve had the joys of taking a load of K at parties (..) it’s gr- it’s really funny (.) it’s a weird one and it’s weird because you can get so:: fucked on K and then a couple hours later you’re back to normal again

Extract 9: Interview 1 with Alice

the reason why so many people get into it [ketamine] is it’s naughty and you never quite know what’s gonna happen (.) ... you f- you feel totally bollocksed like [laughs] and a lot of people enjoy that kind of feeling (.) um yo- it can make you wanna lay down and go off to dream world where you trip

Extract 10: Interview 2 with Jasper

SR: I was going to ask a bit about the kind of things at parties [...]

- do you want to talk us through say a typical night (.) what you might get up to and how you might feel
- Jasper: well (.) some substances were taken before we got in there erm (.) ketamine erm did some base [amphetamine] on the way which I suppose err (.) erm I can't remember anything else really (.) I think it was just a little bit of base and ketamine to begin (.) got in there and did some err pills [ecstasy] quite quickly so err you know it's just get wrecked (.) not stupidly like (.) yeah err (.) didn't take long to get into it and meet people you knew and catch up really and just stomp about (.) the music was quite good err (.) there was a nice atmosphere (.) a very mad atmosphere (.) but not like sketchy mad
- SR: good mad
- Jasper: yeah yeah it was a good mad (.) not a 'god what's happening' type of thing like if something got overwhelming for you

In participants' accounts ketamine is seen as a facilitator of the freedom and escapism that parties represent and as a potential liberator from ego, self or even sanity. Free parties constitute a site for the reproduction of neoliberal discourses and practices about people being free to do what they want, and to exercise their choice to consume (even if this results in a diminished ability to participate in the party). However, the exercising of this freedom seems to offer a temporary escape from the demands of the neoliberal biographical project to be a certain kind of self by (albeit temporarily) escaping into other worlds and other identities based upon extreme intoxication – a 'dream world' in which participants can be 'so:: fucked' and 'bollocksed'. Our participants' talk may therefore reflect a new culture of intoxication that actively seeks and celebrates a loss of control (Measham and Brain 2005). However, our participants' talk on the pleasures of extreme intoxication was not without contradiction. For example the loss of control celebrated by Alice in Extract 9 is a very different account from Genie's problematising of the loss of control in Extract 2. Furthermore, our participant accounts often pointed to the management of the risks and dangers of ketamine. This is hinted at in Jasper's comments about managing his experience so that getting wrecked leads to being 'good mad' rather than being overwhelmed. Being overwhelmed was often couched as a negative experience that was frightening and destructive as evident in Extract 11:

Extract 11: Interview 1 with Alice

it's a drug that (.) has such huge effect on the mind um one it makes you lose half your vocabulary um: it makes you stupid it makes you- like turns you into cave-girl (.) um:: it um: the most incredible and amazing thing about it which is the most messy and destructive thing about it is what we call the sketch where you are open to suggestion and it means you will believe absolutely anything and from that grows this whole (.) sometimes can turn into very messy and scary situation

Here the use of ketamine affects not so much an escape from the self but rather a form of regression which is articulated in Alice's references to losing her 'vocabulary', becoming 'stupid' and turning into 'cave-girl'. However, a negotiation of the multiple understandings – the simultaneous pleasures and risks – of ketamine is also reflected here. Alice's formulation that the messiness and destructiveness of ketamine is also 'the most incredible and amazing thing about it', recalls Dillon et al. (2003) study in which ketamine users reported positive associations with side-effects traditionally perceived to be negative in other drugs.

Conclusion

By examining the ways in which ketamine is understood in the talk of free party participants we have been able to analyse the different ways in which ketamine is constructed, how these discourses construct the values of this scene and what this can tell us about wider issues of contemporary identity-consumption practices.

In our data three repertoires were identified, 'communality and sociality', 'invader other' and 'rights and pleasures of extreme intoxication'. Similar repertoires have been identified in other research on recreational drug and alcohol use, but were constructed differently here, with specific reference to ketamine. That is, ketamine was represented as a threat to sociality and communality because it privileged 'selfish' individual experiences over communal needs and led to a withdrawal of the interactive person as a participatory resource for the party. Ketamine joined a list of 'invader other' drugs and users that have been identified in EDC history, but in this case the participants were usually ketamine users themselves. Ketamine use was also located within both a 'culture of intoxication' (Measham 2006) and of neo-liberalism so that it could be constructed as an enabler of the right and freedom to escape to a different world through extreme but pleasurable intoxication. These repertoires enabled the articulation of a set of values about the free party scene, namely: the importance of social and communal participation and collective experience; individual and collective responsibility; and a space in which individual rights and freedoms can be exercised. By drawing on different values at different times participants were able to negotiate or hold contradictions that characterised their participation (e.g. sociality *vs.* individual choice; collective responsibility and minimization of problematic ketamine use within the in-group *vs.* the pleasure of extreme intoxication). Contradictions were also managed through a 'both/and' construction of ketamine (as both destructive and amazing) and talk that distanced oneself from problematic behaviours associated with ketamine or that constructed other groups of people as symptomatic of such problems.

The managing or holding of these contradictions (participants drew on different discourses almost in the same breath) highlights the complex intermingling of identity and consumption practices. Ketamine was constructed in various ways in order to position or construct different kinds of identities (e.g. the othered city crew; the cave-girl; the caring forest crew), and alternative subjective states or experiences. Furthermore, the use of a discourse of individual rights, choices and freedom could be taken up and applied in a non-economic setting in order to justify and explain practices that would not be considered as dominantly valued behaviours such as extreme intoxication. The repertoires and contradictory discourses drawn upon by participants highlight the ongoing and ever-increasing heterogeneity of the dance culture scene. This flux is reflected in the South West of England free party scene, where the increased presence of ketamine both allows participants to articulate the plural values of this scene, and to negotiate and manage these in relation to their own consumption practices. This is representative of the broader management required by a neoliberal social order, in which free parties constitute a site for the exercising of individual freedoms and rights to consume to excess, as well a site for individual regulation of, and responsibility for, consumption.

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Notes

1. For example, mixed with alcohol ketamine can induce nausea and vomiting (Dillon & Degenhardt, 2001).
2. See Ettorre (2004), Hutton (2006) and Pini (2001) for discussions of the ways in which experiences of drugs associated with EDC (ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamines) are gendered in particular ways, for instance allowing women a greater sense of control than alcohol and, arguably, ketamine.
3. The location of class is particularly difficult with this group of participants. Traditional structural identifiers such as occupation are rendered ambivalent by the frequency of employment outside of the prevailing nine-to-five system.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

(.) A short pause (less than 0.5 s approximately)

(..) a longer pause between 0.5. –1–2 s)

°quiet° speech that is noticeably quieter than surrounding talk

Rea::lly colons mark elongation of prior sound

Underline underlining marks speaker emphasis

>faster< more than and less than signs for speeded up/slower talk

= continuous talk

(brackets) enclose transcribers best guess at what person is saying () empty brackets for talk that is completely unclear