

A subcultural study of recreational ecstasy use



Michelle Gourley

Australian National University

Abstract

This article looks at the extent to which subcultural theories of deviance are still relevant to understanding recreational drug use, given the relatively widespread nature of drug use among today's youth. In order to determine this, the social and subcultural use of the recently popular drug 'ecstasy' (MDMA) is examined using the research methods of semi-structured interviewing and observation. The data suggest that ecstasy use is a manifestation of a broad social involvement in a subculture of drug use. It is argued that subcultural theories of deviance provide an important understanding of ecstasy use in today's society. A main conclusion drawn from the data is that the meaning of drug use has to be looked at in the context of the norms of behaviour and shared understandings of the drug-using subculture in which they are learnt.

Keywords: deviance, drug use, ecstasy, subcultural theories, youth culture

Early research on youth drug use suggested that it occurred predominantly in deviant subcultures. Subcultural theories of deviance have therefore been the dominant theoretical framework within which youth drug use has been examined and understood since the 1950s. Subcultural theories focus on the importance of deviant subcultures to the initiation and maintenance of deviant acts. They argue that deviance is the result of a learned acquisition of deviant values and norms within the context of a subculture (Clinard and Meier, 1992: 98).

Past research has shown that the social controls and learning processes that operate in drug subcultures are the framework within which people decide how a certain drug should be used and how it will be experienced (e.g. Becker, 1963, 1967; Zinberg, 1984). A pioneering work on subcultural drug use was Howard Becker's study of marijuana use published in his

book *Outsiders* in 1963. Becker focused on the conditions necessary for becoming a marijuana user and emphasized the importance of learning within a subculture of drug users in the initiation and maintenance of marijuana use. He found that learning to perceive and enjoy the effects of marijuana is mediated by a subculture of experienced users. He argued that individuals were able to use a drug for pleasure only when they had learnt to conceive of it as a substance that could be used for pleasure. This was found to take place when three conditions were met: the user had learnt the correct technique, learnt to perceive the effects of the drug and learnt to enjoy the effects of the drug. For Becker, these three conditions take place through an individual's interaction with a group of other users who equip the beginner with the necessary concepts with which to organize the drug experience (1963: 30, 51).

Today the nature of drug use in society has changed somewhat from the time when subcultural theories of deviance were first developed and most widely applied. We are now seeing the emergence of widespread recreational drug use amongst relatively large numbers of ordinary youth. Recent drug research indicates that there has been a reduction in ethnic, gender and social class differences in drug use, which suggests that drug-related behaviour is becoming accommodated into a larger grouping of society (Leitner et al., 1995 cited in Measham et al., 1998: 14; Parker and Measham, 1994 cited in Measham et al., 1998). Many young people no longer think of recreational drug use as deviant but see it as rational and informed (Measham et al., 1998). The majority of young recreational drug users today are not cut off from conventional society nor are they associated with problems of addiction, delinquency or crime that are traditionally linked to drug use (Anleu, 1999: 94; Hammersley et al., 2002). Such recent trends in the use of illicit drugs have raised doubt as to whether recreational drug use still takes place within a subcultural context.

A position held by a number of postmodern writers is that the subcultural context of drug use has diminished and thus subcultural theories are outdated (e.g. Parker et al., 1998; Redhead, 1997). They argue that subcultural theories were developed when drug use was seen as atypical and the act of delinquents, and therefore they do not represent the widespread recreational drug scene of today (Parker et al., 1998: 20). They also argue that as a result of postmodernism, there are no longer any clearly differentiated subcultures or specific youth cultural styles due to the individualization and diversification of the music and fashion industries (Redhead, 1997: 103). From this perspective the concept of subculture is deemed unworkable as an analytical tool in the sociology of youth, music and style in post-modern society (Bennett, 1999: 614).

The relevance of subcultural theories to modern-day drug use has been challenged by a normalization perspective on youth drug use that has recently emerged in sociological literature. The work of Howard Parker and

colleagues has been most influential in this area. They argue that drug use is a common form of behaviour among youth who see it as a normal aspect of their lives. They characterized the period of the 1950s to the 1980s as one in which subcultural drug use prevailed but saw a normalization of drug use emerge from the 1990s onwards. The proposal that drugs are so widely spread to be accepted as normal would appear to have little empirical support however (Shiner and Newburn, 1997: 511; Wiberly and Price, 2000). The normalization thesis seems to be an oversimplification of the way in which drug use can be understood today, which raises doubt over whether the criticisms of subcultural theories in relation to drug use are well founded.

The study

The purpose of this article is to question the argument that in contemporary society the relationship between subcultures and drug use has diminished, and to show that subcultural theories of deviance are still relevant to understanding recreational drug use. Specifically, Howard Becker's subcultural theory of deviance, developed from his study of marijuana users in the 1960s, was examined and applied to ecstasy use among youth.

Ecstasy was chosen as the drug of interest in this study for two main reasons. First, because of the relative newness of the drug, few studies have looked at ecstasy use in any qualitative way (Pedersen and Skrondal, 1999: 1696). Second, ecstasy has become a common recreational drug for middle-class youth. Australian statistics from 2001 show that the lifetime use of the drug ecstasy is 19.7 percent for people aged 20 to 29 years old which makes it the third most popular drug for young people after marijuana and amphetamines (AIHW, 2002). The growing popularity of ecstasy is strongly associated with the development of the rave/dance culture in the late 1980s. It is important to note that the ecstasy culture and the dance culture are not one and the same phenomenon, although they are strongly linked (Gourley, 2002).

Observation and semi-structured interviewing were used to investigate ecstasy use in the young population. The observations were drawn from approximately six venues in Canberra and Sydney at which recreational drugs were commonly used, such as dance events, nightclubs and music concerts. These direct observations were accumulated over approximately three years. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 recreational ecstasy users (six female and six male) aged between 20 and 22. They were all of middle-class background and were either university students or in full-time work. The interviewing sessions aimed to uncover subcultural characteristics such as norms of behaviour, values and shared understandings surrounding ecstasy use, and the subcultural learning and socialization processes involved in ecstasy use.

Initiation into ecstasy use

Subcultural theories argue that drug users acquire motivations to use a drug in interaction with other users. Howard Becker argued that people's initiation, maintenance and discontinuance of drug use are the consequence of changes in their conception of the drug and that membership in a drug subculture can vary over time as interaction with other users and acceptance of drug lore change (1963, 1967). Individuals' socialization into ecstasy use can thus be looked at as a function of their degree of interaction with users and their attitude change over time towards the use of illicit drugs.

Interviewees reported that at some stage in the past their attitudes towards drugs were fairly negative and that they considered all drugs to be destructive. A couple of interviewees explained that in high school they were fairly distanced from drug use and there was a general perception among students that only the 'bad' kids were associated with drugs. However, they stated that as they grew older they became increasingly exposed to certain drugs such as ecstasy and discovered that these drugs were being used by normal, conventional youth. This led to a change in their attitude towards drug use. They were now of the view that maybe all drugs were not such a bad thing, and could in fact be used to have fun. Such an attitude change had not taken place for other drugs such as heroin. As one interviewee said: 'smackees [heroin users] give drug users a bad name as they go past the point of recreation'.

The drug ecstasy seems to be a substance used intensely for a short period of time, before there is a move to light recreational use. Users come to have a more cautious view of the drug as they discover that every ecstasy experience is not necessarily as good as the last. As one interviewee remarked, when someone has experienced a good ecstasy pill, they go through a period where they want to take the drug all the time but this does not last.

Interviewees attributed their declining ecstasy use to the fact that they were going to raves and other social events less often and were therefore growing out of the ecstasy scene. This is evident from the following quotes from male and female interviewees respectively: 'I am now disenchanted with the whole scene' and 'I am coming to see that using ecstasy every weekend is pointless as we do the same things.' It would seem that as users grow older they tend to move out of the drug scene and out of the subcultures that embrace recreational drug use and look for other leisure activities.

Peer involvement with ecstasy was a key factor in an individual beginning and maintaining ecstasy use. The interviewees in this study shared similar experiences in terms of entry into drug networks and patterns of consumption through involvement in friendship networks that provided them with access to ecstasy and to a social setting for its consumption. The

majority of the interviewees' first experiences with ecstasy occurred with friends from their immediate social networks who had used ecstasy before and who played a major role in their decision to try the drug. The importance of being with friends who were accepting of ecstasy use, and being in a setting that was conducive to ecstasy use was stressed by the interviewees for all occasions of use. The need for these conditions to be met when using ecstasy highlights the subcultural underpinnings of ecstasy use.

None of the participants had used ecstasy when they were on their own and did not know of anyone else who did so. They believed that ecstasy was only beneficial when it was used in groups, that it was considered abnormal for someone to use ecstasy alone and that he or she would be frowned upon for doing so. For example, one of the interviewees said that anyone using ecstasy alone would be regarded as 'some kind of druggo [drug addict]'. The findings strongly suggest that ecstasy use is very much a group-orientated activity and that there is a norm in the ecstasy culture that one does not use the drug alone.

Initial fears of dangerous experiences from taking ecstasy were challenged by the reassurances of other users who had engaged in ecstasy use with little trouble. It was stressed that friends who were experienced users gave advice and information on safety issues and on the effects of ecstasy before the interviewees made the decision to take ecstasy for the first time. Interaction with friends who use drugs and, in turn, participation in a drug-using subculture, persuade the beginner that drug use can be safe. This supports Zinberg's work which suggests that the drug-using group reinforces an individual's discovery that use of a particular drug is not a bad activity and is worthwhile engaging in (1984: 16).

The importance of having friends within the drug subculture to one's maintenance of ecstasy use is supported by the finding that many of the ecstasy users interviewed said that there were social occasions when they did not plan to take ecstasy but had ended up doing so because they were with friends who were using the drug. The participants also explained that when they take ecstasy they want their friends to have as good a time as them and therefore may try to persuade other users to take ecstasy on a particular occasion. As one respondent said: 'When I use drugs I like to have others with me taking a pill so we can all have a shared [drug] experience.' If interaction with a drug subculture is maintained, a user can therefore both be influenced by, and have an influence on, other users to take ecstasy regularly.

Learning to perceive the effects of ecstasy

According to Becker's subcultural theory of deviance, users learn to perceive a drug's effects through participation in a drug-using subculture. Becker stressed that the novice drug user acquires the concepts that make an

awareness of being high possible through direct communication with other users or via picking up cues from other users within a subcultural context (1963: 50).

Being high not only involves the presence of symptoms, but the recognition and perception of those symptoms and their connection with use of the drug by the user (Becker, 1963: 49). In the present study, ecstasy users were asked about their own experiences of being high from ecstasy use and their observations of others. All those interviewed said that they had seen people who were high on ecstasy but did not believe they were high themselves. This was especially the case with first-timers whom the respondents believed were in denial about the drug's effectiveness and needed to be coached through the experience to be able to recognize the effects of ecstasy. A respondent explained that sometimes people need someone to point out their abnormal behaviours to alert them to the fact that they are high as they are not always conscious of their behaviour. For example, a female respondent remarked that she was unaware that she was high for the first time until other users told her that she was unusually talkative, honest and had huge pupils. Such an example suggests that drug effects alone do not automatically provide the experience of being high, but a user must recognize them (usually through interaction with other users) and consciously connect them with having taken ecstasy.

A further example of how interaction with other users can lead to an awareness of being high is this description by a female interviewee of her first experience: 'I ended up taking five ecstasy tablet halves because I couldn't feel anything [drug effects] for ages'. She recalled that her friends (who were experienced users) kept asking her 'Can you feel anything yet?' to which she would reply 'What am I supposed to feel?' This prompted her friends to inform her of the kind of drug effects she should be looking for so she would know when the drug was working. Such conversations with other users made her become more aware of certain parts of her drug experience and led her to perceive what she described as 'a sudden rush' and connect such a feeling with the notion of being high.

Observations of groups of ecstasy users also brought to light the fact that failure to feel high worries users and leads them to ask more experienced users for advice and reassurance. Some examples of the types of advice and reassurances given by other users within the ecstasy subculture are that smoking a cigarette can help to kick-start the effects, and that the drug will work if you are relaxed, clear-headed and not concentrating on the absence of effects.

Previous subcultural research has found that first-time experiences with a drug are associated with the presence of an experienced user to act as a guide (e.g. Becker, 1963; Cohen, 1988). In the present study the role of an experienced user assumed some importance to how first-timers came to interpret the effects of ecstasy and made sense of the drug experience that

would otherwise be vague and ambiguous. This is evident from the response of a female interviewee when asked about the effects of ecstasy: 'You only really know the meaning of what you are feeling when someone diagnoses it for you, otherwise it is hard to let go and you end up pushing the effects away.' This is further supported by a respondent who stated that he used ecstasy for the first time without other experienced users being present. He recognized when the ecstasy pill was starting to take effect by the fact that he felt 'different' but he did not know how to interpret what he was feeling.

Conversations focused around describing one's elevated mood (being high) are typical among ecstasy users. Users often indicate to others who have taken an ecstasy pill when they are starting to feel the effects. To begin with, users may go into detail about what they are feeling. As one interviewee said: 'You get excited about being smashed and want to broadcast it to everyone.' However, with time and experience, everyone in the group comes to know the meaning of what it feels like to be high on ecstasy and therefore individuals do not need to describe it in such detail anymore. A shared language develops among users in which a simple word or gesture communicates to others that one is high.

It is interesting to note that all the interviewees claimed to have seen or talked to other ecstasy users who believed they were high but to those observing were clearly not. A respondent described such people as 'those who concentrate on the ideal of being high rather than just going with the flow' (i.e. they talk themselves into being high in order to fit the image of the ecstasy scene). This example suggests that the way people behave in situations where drugs are socially consumed is greatly influenced by what they believe they should feel, which is determined by interpretations of their immediate environment and supportive subculture.

Learning to define the effects of ecstasy as pleasurable

Becker argued that drug users learn the pleasures to be derived from an act in the course of interaction with more experienced deviants (1963: 30). He stated that before engaging in the activity of drug use, people have little notion of the pleasures to be derived from it. It is only through experience with the drug coupled with subcultural support that an individual can conceive of the drug experience as pleasurable (Becker, 1963: 52).

All sensations of the drug ecstasy are not necessarily pleasurable such as the potential hallucinations, high alertness and altered sense of touch, which can be perceived as physically unpleasant or ambiguous. Users must learn to define these effects as pleasurable. For example, one interviewee described how she felt paranoid (she believed everyone was staring at her) the first time she took ecstasy, and thought this was abnormal and unpleas-

ant until other users told her that such a feeling was common with the first use of ecstasy and would pass. She was able to relax after this advice and ended up defining her experience as highly pleasurable. This supports Becker's assertion that 'how a person experiences the effects of a drug depends greatly on the way others define those effects for him [or her]' (1967: 105).

Experienced users are important to those having doubts about first using ecstasy and to those deciding whether to continue use after a bad experience with the drug. Becker outlined in his work on marijuana use that it is common for users to have an unpleasant experience with a drug, which they cannot define as pleasurable. He argued that the likelihood of a redefinition of the drug as again capable of producing pleasure depends on the degree to which the individual interacts with other users (Becker, 1963: 56). In the present study, all but one interviewee had at least one unpleasant experience with the drug ecstasy, but it did not lead them to cease use. One of the reasons for this was that by the end of the week users had forgotten about their bad experiences, and the excitement of the weekend, going out and socializing had taken over. Their wish to continue interacting with an ecstasy-using group of peers was a major influencing factor in users' definitions and perceptions of ecstasy use and thus their ecstasy-using behaviour.

Becker's work on marijuana demonstrated how subcultural support in the form of help and advice from experienced users is important to how a user will overcome an unpleasant drug experience (Becker, 1963: 57). When asked about their not so pleasant experiences with ecstasy, most respondents reported that other users had helped them through such events by attempting to talk them out of feeling scared or paranoid, and by reassuring them that any negative drug-effects would pass. Observations also brought to light the commonality of experienced users giving water to users feeling ill and teaching inexperienced users to regulate their use so as to avoid unpleasant come-downs in the future.

Paul Willis argued that drug experiences are socially constructed, culturally learned and defined in the context of subcultural use rather than being based on the properties of different types of drugs (cited in Hall and Jefferson, 1975: 119). Most of the respondents in this study attributed their best experiences with ecstasy to the atmosphere, their frame of mind and presence of close friends. The purity of the pill was considered only a secondary influence. For example, one respondent said that her best experiences with ecstasy were not the result of a good pill but had been when she was around a group of people who were all in a good mood and in a setting conducive to ecstasy use. Another interviewee stated 'It's not where you go but who you're with' in reference to what makes an enjoyable ecstasy experience. These comments attest to the importance of atmosphere, companions and state of mind in determining the outcome of the drug experience. It is through involvement in a subculture in which drug use is

normalized that a user can get the most out of the drug experience by having access to a drug-conducive environment and interaction with other like-minded users.

Transmission of knowledge within the ecstasy subculture

Becker's studies of marijuana use along with more recent drug research have emphasized that communication and transmission of knowledge about drugs through stories and folklore represent important aspects of user subcultures (Becker, 1967; McElrath and McEvoy, 2001). Cultural information and options for behaviour are spread through interacting social networks, which leads to a common world of discourse for the members of a subculture (Fine and Kleinman, 1988 cited in Moore, 1990: 338).

The importance of expert knowledge, which is accumulated within subcultures, is emphasized in Grebenc's study of drug subcultures in which prohibited knowledge was shown to circulate among drug users through storytelling (2001: 105). A picture emerged from observations and interviews that much expert knowledge is accumulated inside the ecstasy culture. For example, it is common knowledge among ecstasy users that if you chew rather than swallow an ecstasy pill it will work faster, that smoking marijuana during the come-down phase helps to alleviate the negative effects of ecstasy and sucking a lolly-pop prevents the jaw grinding associated with ecstasy use.

Becker illustrated the importance of an informed user subculture as a way to create a safe context for drug use. He found that a continually evolving folklore educates users which results in individuals being able to gain experience with the drug and communicate their experiences to other users (Becker, 1967; cited in Beck and Rosenbaum, 1994: 143). Within the ecstasy culture stories are transmitted from user to user about how to use the drug safely. For example, stories involving instances of people getting caught with ecstasy or having an unpleasant experience with the drug provide users with the appropriate information and knowledge to guide their own drug-related behaviour.

Drug stories are also used to affirm the decision to take particular drugs (Parker et al., 1998: 145). Most of those interviewed said that they had heard about the drug ecstasy through other users and through stories in the media, and came to associate its use with an image of high-energy dancing and partying. This had an influence on their perception of ecstasy as a soft party drug and on their decision to use it. Two interviewees said that they wanted to try ecstasy because of all the hype surrounding it in the media and in the young population. Information with regard to drug use is thus not only transmitted through face-to-face interaction but also circulated through a wider interlocking social network.

Deviant activities tend to generate a specialized language to describe the events, people and objects involved, which is learnt through participation in the deviant subculture and through interaction with other members (Becker, 1967). Within the culture surrounding ecstasy use, drug lingo is common among users. There is a vast array of specialized terms used for taking ecstasy, being high, coming down, and names for both the drug and ecstasy users themselves. For example, 'dropping', 'racking up', 'pilling', 'peaking', 'scattered', 'lollies', 'disco biscuits' and 'eccy-heads' are all terms that have little meaning to those outside the ecstasy subculture.

Shared understandings/values

Subcultural theories maintain that membership in a drug subculture requires evidence that drug users share similar cultural ideas about drugs (Becker, 1963; Fine and Kleinman, 1979 cited in Covington, 1997: 120). Part of the underlying symbolism of drug use is the shared understandings which organize and make sense out of the reality of drug use (Moore, 1990: 335). The information obtained from interviews with, and observations of, ecstasy users reveals that there are shared ideas, values and beliefs that govern the use of ecstasy among groups of users, which suggests the presence of a drug subculture.

When the effects of ecstasy were discussed with those interviewed, it became clear that users share similar cultural ideas about the positive effects of ecstasy. All those interviewed believed that the drug reduces people's inhibitions by making them more honest and open, and enhances communication and closeness with others.

Interviewees gave similar reasons for why they use the drug ecstasy. One of the most common reasons was that interviewees wished 'to be on the same level' as their friends when out as a group, and thus were much more inclined to use ecstasy on a particular occasion if their friends were using the drug. One respondent was adamant that 'certain circumstances call for ecstasy use' such as being at a major dance event (rave). Another common response was that ecstasy was used to enable people to party all night and to make the fun and excitement of the night last longer. This quote from an interviewee illustrates the recreational side to ecstasy use: 'You just know you are going to have the best time on an E [ecstasy pill].' Most interviewees used ecstasy to enhance their mood and to relax or unwind after a week of work or university. The data show some support for the view that recreational drug use fits into young people's idea of time out from the stresses and strains of everyday life (Parker et al., 1998: 2).

Becker stressed that most deviant subcultures have a self-justifying rationale to neutralize conventional attitudes and legitimize the continuance of the deviant act (1963: 38). Justifications for ecstasy use were very similar among respondents and can be placed into three main categories. The first

type of justification is to do with the perceived safety of the drug. All interviewees were aware that there may be long-term dangers associated with ecstasy use such as brain damage. They showed little concern however and focused on the fact that they hadn't personally seen or heard of many bad experiences with the drug and believed that they did not find it addictive. One interviewee stated that 'Ecstasy is very safe when you know what you are doing and when you are with others who know what they are doing.' Ecstasy's reputation as easily controllable and user-friendly relieves the fears of many people (Beck and Rosenbaum, 1994: 58).

The second self-justifying rationale that came to light when interviewing ecstasy users was that ecstasy use is thought to be so commonplace among young people that the respondents had difficulty in perceiving ecstasy users as committing a criminal act. One respondent said that people see other people using ecstasy who aren't risk takers or the type of people typically associated with drug use and therefore come to see ecstasy use as legitimate behaviour. None of the users interviewed regarded ecstasy use as deviant or as a rejection of social convention. It would seem that the drug ecstasy has had a huge impact on young people's perceptions of drug taking in that it has given ordinary youth a positive experience of illegal drug use.

The third main justification that users gave for their drug use was that ecstasy, like alcohol and tobacco, is used as part of people's leisure. Many interviewees considered ecstasy use to be a good alternative to drinking alcohol. This is because a night out can be cheaper when using ecstasy than drinking alcohol and enables users to drive home without the fear of being caught for drink driving. The belief that ecstasy use can be more convenient than drinking alcohol is further illustrated by this response from a male interviewee: 'Taking a pill can be so much easier than drinking 10 beers in order to feel a high.' Some respondents even saw the drug ecstasy as less of a danger than alcohol, believing it allowed people to stay more in control of their body.

Norms of behaviour/sanctions

Subcultures, like cultures in general, prescribe norms which regulate conduct and are ordered socially (Rubington and Weinberg, 1968: 207). This study identified norms of conduct and social sanctions surrounding the use of ecstasy that define moderate and acceptable use, condemn compulsive use, limit use to settings conducive to the drug experience and routinize use.

A picture emerged from interviews and observations that characteristic occasions when ecstasy was used were planned activities, and that a cycle of socializing, dancing and drinking is the norm when the drug is used. Ecstasy can be both a social and an antisocial drug. There are times when users can't stop talking and want to be with others, and there are times

when they just want to dance for hours by themselves, get immersed in the music and block out those around them. Part of learning the effects of ecstasy and the norms that go with it is that there are times to be sociable, times to dance and times for self-contemplation, especially when the come-down is experienced.

When asked about where ecstasy is taken, interviewees reported that they had used ecstasy most often at raves or dance events because of the drug-conducive atmosphere of such settings. They said that they had only used ecstasy at specific clubs, bars and house parties where their drug-using behaviours were accepted by those around them. It was clear from observations that social sanctions limit ecstasy use to settings conducive to the drug experience. For example, disapproving looks are often directed at people who are clearly high on drugs in mainstream bars, pubs and clubs where alcohol is the substance of choice. Social interaction with drug users in such venues is typically avoided, especially on the dance floor. Such subtle sanctions are used to enforce conformity.

There are also social sanctions that condemn compulsive use in the ecstasy culture. People who use ecstasy compulsively often find themselves excluded from their drug-using peer group. For example, many of the interviewees said that they no longer socialized with friends who they believed had taken ecstasy use to an extreme. Mechanisms such as social exclusion therefore help to ensure that individuals will conform to convention. Unspoken rules of the drug subculture exert a powerful influence in regulating individual drug-taking behaviour and conduct.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to question the recent arguments that the relationship of subcultures to drug use has weakened and that subcultural theories of deviance are outdated. The findings from this study suggest that subcultural theories of deviance are still relevant to understanding recreational drug use in contemporary society.

First, the findings indicate that ecstasy use occurs in an ecstasy-using subculture. Specific norms of behaviour, social sanctions, shared understandings and values can be identified that are particular to ecstasy users as well as clear rules concerning why, where and how much it is considered legitimate to use ecstasy by groups of users. The research suggests that there is a great deal of normality in user perceptions of their drug use and in the way ecstasy is used by groups in specific social contexts. This supports an underlying assumption of subcultural theories that deviance needs to be understood as normal behaviour in specific social circumstances. It is evident that knowledge and behaviour concerning ecstasy use are transmitted through an interlocking social network, which further suggests the presence of an ecstasy subculture.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of learning within a drug subculture to the initiation, maintenance and experience of ecstasy use. It is through the course of experience in drug-using groups that users acquire the norms, values and shared understandings surrounding the use of a drug. The findings indicate that the experience of ecstasy use is a social one, involving a process of initiation into use of the drug through exposure to the drug subculture. Ecstasy users learn to perceive and enjoy the effects of the drug through interaction with experienced users within a subculture who pass on the customs for doing so (Palmer and Humphrey, 1990: 271). This research therefore confirms subcultural drug research and in particular Howard Becker's theory of deviance, and extends it to ecstasy use. The findings of this study suggest that Becker's research on what was considered a deviant subculture approximately 40 years ago still has relevance to what is considered more of a mainstream recreational subculture in today's society. They also suggest that no better conceptual framework for understanding youth drug use has appeared since subcultural theories of deviance were first developed and applied.

No matter how subcultural theories are challenged, whether by a normalization perspective of drug use or by postmodern discourse that envisions a fracturing and fragmenting of youth culture, the subcultural perspective helps us to understand ecstasy use in contemporary society. The subcultural perspective may not provide a complete understanding of illicit drug use in modern times, but it does present useful guidelines for research and investigation. One conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the meaning of drug use has to be looked at in the context of the norms of behaviour and shared understandings of the drug-using group in which they are learnt. There is little doubt that subcultural theories still have a lot to offer to the sociological understanding of deviance, drug use, youth culture and social interaction in contemporary society.

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