

Drug essay



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This essay is going to look at Howard Parker et al's (1998) theory of 'normalisation' and critically evaluate whether or not it is still relevant in contemporary society. The essay will begin by explaining the theory in relation to how and where it developed from. The essay will move on to focus on specific aspects such as globalisation and how certain issues have affected the 'normalisation' of recreational drug use.

The focus will then move onto describing the seven dimensions of 'normalisation' that Howard et al (1998) developed; drug availability, drug trying, drug use, being drug wise, future intentions, cultural accommodation of the illicit and risk taking as a life skill. These seven factors will be assessed and evaluated. From here the direction will change, as the essay focuses on the work of Shiner and Newburn (1998), offering a critical analysis of the 'normalisation' thesis.

By the end of this essay the aim is to have evaluated Howard et al's work and concluded with whether or not the 'normalisation' thesis is applicable in contemporary society. The 'Normalisation' theory emerged from Parker et al in the 1990s. Two explanations that existed prior to the introduction of the 'normalisation' theory were the 'Individualistic' and 'Sociological' explanations (Barton, 2003).

The Individualist perspective placed the individual adolescent at the centre of the phenomenon and focused on a psychoanalytical theory; whereas the Sociological explanation (also referred to as sub-cultural theory) focused more upon external factors such as socialisation and roles (Barton, 2003). These traditional ideas however were eroded through the development of

Normalisation and the term became popular when referring to ‘recreational rather than problematic drug use’ (Blackman, 2004: 127). With reference to this, the theory is specific in that it only refers to certain drugs and not all.

These drugs tend to be those that are viewed as and used in a ‘recreational’ manor, for example some of the drugs included are; Cannabis, amphetamines and also hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD and ecstasy. Heroin and Cocaine are not included as these tend to be seen as drugs used for dependency and addiction purposes rather than recreational (Blackman, 2004). The theory offered a ‘conceptual framework to monitor, in this case, how attitudes and behaviour in respect of illegal drugs and drug users change through time’ (Parker, 2005: 206).

At the time it was a new and exciting way of viewing drug use; looking at society as a whole and placing drug use ‘within the realm of cultural norms as a social practice’ (Blackman, 2004: 138); rather than focusing on the individual adolescent or ‘deviant’ youth cultures. The theory focuses upon the idea that ‘drug use has become more conventional and integrated into certain peoples lives’ (Blackman, 2004: 138). Contemporary developments such as globalisation have aided the development of the ‘Normalisation’ thesis.

Parker (2005) states that: Illicit drugs consumption, particularly by conventional ‘ordinary’ young people, has grown in importance within lifestyles which are themselves evolving in response to structural and global changes in post-modern societies (Parker, 2005: 206). Children, more so teenagers are beginning to experience different things through adolescence

than previous generations. Central to these changes are marketing and consumerism; creating a clear link between youth cultures and drug cultures (South, 1999).

These links are created through ‘ the mass consumption of products such as songs, music, videos, t-shirts, clothes, logos, jackets, badges and posters’ (Blackman, 1996, cited in south, 1999: 7). To try and understand some of the changes that have occurred to aid the process of ‘ normalisation’ Parker (1998) has suggested seven dimensions to try and understand and monitor young Britons’ attitudes and behaviour to ‘ recreational’ drug use over the past decade (Parker, 2005).

The first dimension looks at drug availability and accessibility, without which Parker et al (2002) claim ‘ normalisation’, could not take place. Over the past decade the availability of a variety of drugs has increased. With more and more drugs becoming available on the streets, prices are falling lower than ever. However purity levels are remaining the same, causing drug use to increase. Nowadays most youngsters obtain their drugs through social networks and friends of friends, who know the local dealers supplying on a small-scale level (Parker et al, 2002).

Although this would therefore mean a huge population of young Britons have breached the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, this type of dealing is extremely common and also very difficult for the police to detect, as it is concealed between small networks of users buying usually ‘ recreational’ drugs for personal use (Parker et al. 2002). Such behaviours between these groups of friends have become so ‘ normalised’ that they do not see what they are

doing as breaking the law, most of the users will otherwise live a fairly law-abiding lifestyle where drugs have a purely recreational purpose (Parker et al, 2002).

The next dimension looks at drug trying and how rates have increased (especially during the 1990s) among adolescent Britons over the past few decades (Parker et al, 1998). Drug trying rates are younger than ever with young Britons being the most involved drug users in Europe (Parker et al, 2002). As well as drug trying occurring younger it has become more obvious that drug use is lasting longer, beyond adolescence (Parker, 2005). One example is that the ‘ children of the nineties are taking their drug experience with them in that ‘ recreational’ drug use is rising slowly amongst twenty-somethings’ (Parker, 2005: 207).

The ‘ normalisation’ of drugs has been supported by the narrowing class and gender differences. Traditional gender ideals were based upon the premise that young men were more willing to try and experiment with drugs than women, nowadays there are records which show no major differences between the sexes (Parker et al, 1998). Traditionally, women were seen to take fewer drugs than men as their role was seen to involve housework, childcare and familial responsibilities.

This ideal however has drastically changed and nowadays women are said to use as many drugs as men (Henderson, 1999). This is believed to have occurred due to the introduction of rave culture or as Parker (2001) refers to it the ‘ decade of dance’ (Parker, 2001: 8). Women felt safe within this culture, they were equal and just as important as their now male equivalents

(Henderson, 1999). As far as social class reports go some have shown that it is now the middle class, children of ‘ professional and managerial’ parents who are trying the most drugs.

One argument is that if drug use is linked to failure and deviant behaviours why would these middle class, higher education students be using drugs and succeeding in their work... (Parker et al, 1998). The next element of the ‘ normalisation’ thesis Parker et al identify is recent and regular drug use. Research suggests that drug use rises during the five year period from the age of fifteen to twenty. Studies show that around ‘ 10–15 percent of late adolescents are recent, regular recreational drug users’ (Parker et al, 2002: 947), with this percentage increasing amongst young adults.

The drug of preference appears to be cannabis; however poly-drug use occurs with some of the 18-25 year olds also using stimulant drugs recreationally at weekends (Parker et al, 2002). One issue that Parker et al (2002) point out is that ‘ clubbers’ create a problem within the ‘ normalisation’ debate as they believe ‘ the clubbers are at the serious end of recreational drug use’ (Parker et al, 2002: 947). They point out that within the night-club world their behaviours are accepted and shared; however they question whether or not such actions would be as widely accepted outside of this environment.

Their poly-drug habits and risky behaviours contradict what the ‘ normalisation’ of recreational drug use stands for; responsible and sensible drug use (Parker et al, 2002). Issues like this have placed the dance/rave culture at the centre of the normalisation thesis as one of the central points

to the 'normalisation' thesis. The next factor that must be looked at is being drug wise also referred to as 'the social accommodation of 'sensible' recreational drug use' (Parker et al, 2002: 207).

The effect of 'normalisation' can be measured here through the acceptance of drug use by what Parker et al (2002) refers to as abstainers and ex users. Abstainers make a personal choice against taking illegal drugs. However they are sometimes unable to escape drugs and drug users as they go about their daily lives; whether it is at work, school or on nights out. Through experiencing this once unknown world first hand, abstainers are able to see the difference between using 'hard' drugs such as heroin and using drugs such like cannabis recreationally.

Abstainers in general tend to have an acceptance of recreational users as they believe it is their decision, this is very important as it shows the move towards 'normalisation' (Parker et al, 1998). It has been found that many abstainers have friends or are part of a friendship group in which recreational drug use is the norm and they respect their choices (Pirie & Worcester, 1999 cited in Parker et al, 2005). Nevertheless Parker et al (2005) do not claim that there are no abstainers who are not completely against drugs, drug use and have no contact with anyone using them.

They simply point out that many young people today are becoming more open minded and sensible with their judgements, mainly due to them becoming more drug wise (Parker et al, 1998). Another important aspect Parker et al identified is Future intentions. They claim that traditionally it was seen as 'normal' for adolescents to occasionally experiment with drugs as it

was seen as ‘rule testing and rebelliousness’ (Parker et al, 1998: 156).

However it is becoming more apparent that drug trying is carrying on beyond adolescence and into adulthood.

An open mindedness has occurred about prospective drug use and future intentions to try or reuse drugs. This is not only with former users but amongst those who remained abstinent throughout adolescence (Parker, 1998). The next dimension focuses on the Cultural accommodation of the illicit and looks at how cultural acceptance of drug use appears to be increasing. The media has played a very important role in showing how society has begun to slowly accept recreational drug use as ‘liveable with’ (Parker, 2002: 949).

Some positive portraits by the media of illicit substance use within popular television dramas and soaps have opened the eyes of the public into what was once an unknown sub-cultural world (Parker et al, 2002). Many arguments in the media have been aimed towards the decriminalisation of certain drugs such as cannabis, with calls for tighter surveillance on more harmful drugs such as heroin and cocaine. It seems here that it is also important to consider globalisation and the effect this has had on recreational drug use.

It would seem that through globalisation, drug trafficking and marketing have made more ‘psycho-active substances’ (Parker, 2005: 208) available, which seems to be increasing recreational demand and use in certain societies (Parker, 2005). The final dimension that will complete Parker et al’s

theory of ‘normalisation’ is risk taking as a life skill. This dimension is looks at Beck’s (1992) theory that we live in a risk society.

He believed that taking no risks in life is riskier than taking risks (Parker et al, 1998). We live n a society now where the transition period from adolescence towards adulthood is extending, more and more teenagers are choosing higher education routes or training courses which mean they are dependent on parents for longer, meaning the traditional ideals of marriage and children are delayed (Parker et al, 1998). Parker et al (1998) use this example in relation to the ‘normalisation’ thesis as they believe risk management has become natural in everyday life. We do not perceive the risks we take on a daily basis as dangerous or hazardous, we simply hope the choices we make are the right ones (parker, 1998).

In relation to this they believe that drug trying is simply another risk factor encountered through the individual’s adolescent life, it is their choice to evaluate the positives against the negatives when making their decision. However Parker et al (1998) point out that this does not mean it is correct or safe; they simply believe that it is made into a problem/moral panic by adults who cannot understand how growing up in contemporary society is different to what they experienced through adolescence.

It would appear that the illegality factor is not particularly seen much of an issue when making the decision of taking drugs (Parker et al, 1998).

However, although Parker et al’s theory of ‘normalisation’ has for many been a major development in understanding and combating recreational drug use it has not gone without its critiques. Shiner and Newburn (1998)

reject Parker et al's theory and argue that; although it is not unknown nowadays for adolescents to use illicit substances, they believe that 'normalisation' over generalises and exaggerates the actual level of participation.

They state that 'in Britain, drug use, particularly current use, remains a minority activity and participation in the drug culture of the 'rave' scene is limited to a relatively small proportion of young people' (Shiner and Newburn, 1998: 156). They also criticise the emphasis Parker et al place upon postmodernism, the idea that 'normalisation' has been 'characterised by the fracturing of moral authority, increasing globalisation, an emphasis on consumption rather than production, and a reshaping of class and gender relationship' (Shiner and Newburn, 1998: 141).

They argue against this as they believe that post modernity is a contested concept, therefore how can it be valid to place their whole concept around this notion (Shiner and Newburn, 1998). They also believe that Parker et al's theory of 'normalisation' places too much emphasis on lifetime users and by doing this illicit drug use amongst adolescents becomes too generalised and therefore not representative (Barton, 2003). They argue that to gain a more accurate picture of young people's drug use, shorter time frames are needed to provide a more 'conservative picture' (Barton, 2003: 120).

They talk about something called 'desistance' and draw attention to some data that shows: Of the young people who have ever used an illicit drug significant proportions are not current or regular users. While, for these young people, there may have been a point in their lives when they used

drugs occasionally or even regularly, they may have subsequently and consciously moved to a position of non-use (Shiner and Newburn, 1998: 151).

Shiner and Newburn emphasise the fact that although drug use seems to be more popular amongst the young than older age groups, at no point do drug users out number non-users (Shiner and Newburn, 1998). They also claim that many young people still adhere to the view that using illicit drugs is wrong (Barton, 2003). In one of their studies they found that ‘ even among 16-19-year-olds, the category with the largest proportion of drug users, 54 per cent of respondents had never used an illicit drug at any point in their lives’ (Shiner and Newburn, 1998: 144).

However Parker et al (2005) do state that the ‘ normalization process does not require that a majority of people in a society will take illegal drugs’ (Parker et al, 2005: 207) – they are simply trying to show how society has become more accepting of illicit substance use. Blackman (2004) also criticises the ‘ normalisation’ theory as he states that it focuses too closely on contemporary society and ignores the historical context. Blackman (2004) argues that evidence would suggest that every past society has used and explored drugs as part of its cultural practice, indicating that drugs play a vital role in human nature (Blackman, 2004).

However he continues to say that since ‘ drug consumption has been a feature of common and ritual life’ (Blackman, 2004: 127), it now represents a normalised activity by individuals in society (Blackman, 2005). Conclusively when evaluating the concept of the ‘ normalisation’ of recreational drug use

and its relevance in contemporary society, it is fair to say that for many it has been seen as an untidy concept that overgeneralises and does not distinguish between who, when and why people take drugs.

However that aside it has provided a very useful framework that helps us to understand and apply the concept in modern society. I believe that the youth of today are becoming a lot more accommodating of drugs and the purpose they hold in our society due to consumerism, globalisation and the media. The British Crime Survey from 2000 showed that non-drug-trying individuals are now in the minority (Barton, 2003), reflecting that more and more adolescents are willing to try drugs.