

# Theory of normalisation of drugs | literature review



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### **“ Who Hasn’t Tried At Least one?”**

An investigation into normalised recreational drug use in the South West and whether legal controls act as an effective deterrence to illegal drug consumption.

### **Literature review**

When considering the concepts of “ normalisation” and “ recreational drug use”, it is crucial to first establish what is here meant by these terms in actuality. Often the two phenomena are met with difficulties<sup>[i]</sup>(Parker, Aldridge and Measham 1998), difficulties which form in conflicting theories, what they are defined as and in which social environments they can be correctly used. The following review will be focusing on how historically, the concepts of normalisation and recreational drug use have been adopted into society and to what extent they correlate with one another.

### **Does normalisation simply mean “ normal”?**

The first development of the term normalisation was uncovered in Denmark throughout the 1950’s, in order to create a normal living standard for individuals with forms of disabilities, disadvantages and those who were generally considered to lead a life in poor living conditions<sup>[ii]</sup>(Emerson, 1992). The concept came in form as the piece of Danish legislation introduced by Niels Erik Bank-Mikkelsen called the<sup>[iii]</sup>1959 Mental Retardation Act, it’s political aims were to fundamentally change perspectives towards those with intellectual difficulties, hopefully resulting in the group becoming “ normalised” and attaining the same community based rights as those without disabilities, such as work, clothing, housing and education. Since the concept was first pioneered in the 1950’s, the term,  
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after being translated into English by Dr. Bengt Nirje, has been widely adopted and revisited in many diverse fields of service, academia and literature but mostly referred to as a principle and theory[iv](Nirje 1969; [v]Wolfensberger, 1972). Characteristically, normalisation refers to specific a group of individual's social behaviours (particularly deviants), and those behaviours becoming a part of the wider society's social norms, which become as close to day to day conventional life as is possible, ranging " from life's rhythms and routines to economic and environmental standards" (Nirje 1969; Parker,[vi]Williams, Aldridge 2002). After making an impact of American professionals, Dr. Wolfensberger introduced the practice of normalisation into the United States in 1970. Wolfenberger made the concept of normalisation into a social relation by pointing out its obvious connections with other social concepts such as the labelling theory, but he also recognised that in fact the differences within disabled groups were still present despite the strive for social equality, this was later accepted by Emerson who pointed out that the concepts were transferable to any devalued social group or those at risk of being a devalued social group[vii] (Emerson and McGill, 1989). This then, as previously mentioned, allowed for other social sciences to adapt and investigate the theory in their specialised fields, where here specifically is relevant, Criminology and drugs.

### **Drug use: The differences between recreation and addiction.**

Throughout the post-war decades there have been numerous drug epidemics, such as " the ' speeding' mods in the sixties to ' tripping' hippies during the seventies through to a new wave of heroin users in the 1980's" (Parker, Aldridge and Measham, 1998). Whilst all were thought of as a form

of ephemeral drug taking, they were also known as behaviours found in the minority groups of the populations, and almost always referred to as deviant. But, a social change of massive proportions emerged throughout the nineties that was unparalleled to the previous decades. The nineties saw an unprecedented surge in drug taking amongst more than just the minority groups, much more. In fact, the dramatic rise in drug trying was among those considered “ordinary” and “conventional”. ([viii]Aldridge, Parker and Measham, 1999; [ix]Ashton and Camali, 1995).

A significant dominance in the development of the theory known as the “normalisation thesis” is that of Howard Parker and Colleagues (1995). They suggest that the previous links between illicit drugs use and deviant behaviour no longer exist with regards to crime. They argue that it has instead become a part of the core youth culture in the United Kingdom, which has essentially stemmed from our freedom of choices and consumerism/consumption habits. This evokes the idea that drug use is no longer problematic, but recreational. The central argument here is that globalisation has created issues for a post-modernistic Britain in the form of an increased tolerance for drug use, which has been influenced by consumption. This meaning a basic phenomenon here of supply and demand, but of an illegal nature, the demand for drugs theoretically being higher due to perhaps more disposable income, contributed by the ease of accessibility and sale. Thus, the freedom of recreational drug consumption is inevitably begun. This specific literature is one that spurred and encouraged the idea for the research in this dissertation. Much like the thesis here, the research in this document adopts the same rationales or assumptions but

with a specific focus on people between the ages of 18-45 whom reside in the South West. In Parker, Williams and Aldridge (2002) they measure 'sensible' recreational drug use by adopting the normalisation theory. The research only includes specific drugs which are considered recreational. The research defines "sensible" drug use here by expressing that using sensibly does not include using drugs on a regular daily basis, as this can qualify, by definition, as addiction (Parker et al., 1998). They also specify that using a combination of any drugs at one given time does not equate to sensible either. The drugs that were included in this research were Cannabis, Ecstasy, Amphetamines and LSD. The study in this document will also include a measurement of recreational use of these specific drugs along with others, in order to identify of which is most common, what other drugs most users have tried, followed by an evaluation into their reasoning's why, and further analysis with regards to where the consumption takes place.

As previously touched on, in Parker, Aldridge and Measham (1995) their investigation identified the gradual progressive nature of drug use from the sixties, seventies and eighties and how they differed from the nineties whereby the stereotypical drug user was no longer considered to be a part of a deviant subculture. Instead, they were found to be a part of mainstream youth culture that was said to be brought on by the shift in music at the time known as "rave". The so-called dance music culture, inspired by DJ's globally (Forsyth, Barnard and McKeganey, 1997), became normalised throughout society, which encouraged youths to party hard and indulge in party experiences. The nature of their consumption pursuits ultimately led to the introduction of many "exciting" and "experience enhancing" drugs,

such as ecstasy[xi](Pham and Puzantian, 2001). As is already known, since the nineties there has since been an ongoing culture of drug use amongst not only youths, but Britons in general, which still closely relates to the unprecedented nineties but instead of it just being rave related, it is now related to any experience where drugs could be seen as an “enhancement”. The core objective of this study aims to evaluate these theory’s, as to whether Britons are taking drugs recreationally to feel good/enhance experience’s, with a focus on the South West.

Due to the influx of drug use becoming more substantial than ever in British history during the nineties, 1996 saw the Home Office begin recording trends on the phenomenon through the Crime Survey of England and Wales. In 1996, the percentages of drug users recorded amongst 16-24 year olds in the previous year, was an astonishing 30% that rose to 33% In 1999. This age group was considerably higher than the general population as a whole, which was recorded to be about 11% at the time. Since then though, the recorded figures show a relatively flat movement with no major rise or falls in percentages amongst the 16-59 age group. In comparison, the 16-24 age group figures have been dropping at a steady rate since 1996. However, 2013-2014 did see the slight increase of 4% compared to the previous year, this figure has remained around the same presently as last year’s percentages being around 18%. The year 2015-2016 shows that 1 in 12 (8.4%) of adults aged 16-59 had taken a drug in the last year, which equates to around 2.7 million people. The proportion of adults ages 16-24 taking drugs in the last year more than doubled the proportion of the relative 16-59 group. Despite the these disproportionate figures though, the Home Office

Drug Misuse findings state that “ *Over the last five years there has been some fluctuation in this series, but is likely that the recent trend in drug use among 16 to 24 year olds is relatively flat. However, the long-term trend is downward; the 2015/16 estimate is statistically significantly lower compared with 10 years ago (25. 2% in the 2005/06 survey year) and with the start of the time series in 1996 (29. 7%)*”. These statistics essentially suggest a significant fall in most drug users. These figures, while they are dropping, are still considerably high. And so, the normalisation theory had been introduced, attempting to remove the stigmatism attached to young people who take drugs recreationally and move away from the idea that they are deviants and/or involved in crimes. Another objective of the research in this dissertation using survey analysis is to identify young people in the South West’s perceptions of drug use figures compared to actual figures, and whether they match what is going on. Do they feel as though recreational drug use is dropping, staying the same or increasing?

In Muncie 1999, it is identified that trends in drug use have changed from the addiction of drugs such as cocaine and heroin, to more leisurely drugs used by the modern youths in leisurely activities, they include, alcohol, cannabis and ecstasy. Although being under the influence when taking these drugs which may lead to crime, this could be considered out of character, and not creating a crime orientated lifestyle which harder drugs and addiction may create such as heroin[xii](Inciardi, 1979). An example could be the criminal behaviours that addiction to drug class A users may undergo such as theft, mugging, and burglary to fuel their habits and addictions[xiii] (Parker and Newcombe, 1987). However, when a young person leisurely uses

recreational drugs such as ecstasy or cannabis, this does not necessarily result in in person to undergo criminal activities or offences. A clear activist for such statements is Professor David Nutt who was the chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, in 2009 however,[xiv]The Independent newspaper released an article stating that the professor was asked to resign because of his claims about illegal drugs such as ecstasy, LSD and cannabis being of less harm to human health than products legally available to the public like alcohol and tobacco.

Although Parker et al. (1998) does not fully undertake postmodernism as structural inequality still exists, they believe that young people's behaviour and choices have changed towards drugs due to a post-modern society that allows them to consume freely. For example, Mott and Mirrlees-Black (1993) found that the number of 16-19 year olds using cannabis more than doubled from 1983 to 1991. Normalisation has become an indicator of " changes in social behaviour and cultural perspectives", meaning that the opinion about some illicit drugs has changed within the youth culture which in return affects their social behaviour as they do not think that using the drug is wrong or immoral. However, it could be argued that it is overgeneralizing to assume that all young people see drug use as ' normal', Dowds and Redfern (1994) found that approximately two-thirds of 12-15 year olds saw taking cannabis as a serious offense.

Hunt and Stevens (2004) suggest that the government and media use drug normalisation as the proof for an increased disciplinary regulation and endorse policies as it is viewed to be a drug outbreak that needs to be



broken or finished. For example, drug testing has been introduced in some schools to help prevent usage by young people (Craver, 2004).

Illicit drug use is frequently associated with the youth culture, Robson (1994) points out that the most common time for using or trying drugs is between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. It is suggested that this is due to adolescents being the time of experimentation in many aspects of life which can lead to rebellion. Coleman (1992: 13) suggests a psychoanalytical-theory of three main reasons why young people and drugs are linked together: adolescence is a time of vulnerability as well as being impressionable, of rebellion and non-conformity and the need to be independent by disengaging from family relationships.

These changes through adolescence support Coleman's sociological theory that youth culture experiment in different social aspects of life, such as subcultures and trends or sexualities and in this case drugs. In relation to the normalisation theory, young people are able to experiment with drugs due to the wide availability of them as well as the access young people have to them due to people they know (Barton 2003).

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