

The theory of normalisation



Howard Parker and colleagues (1995) have had a dominant role in the development of the “normalisation thesis”. They argue that illicit drug use is no longer a sign of deviant behaviour in relation to crime, but a central part of youth culture due to freedom of choice and consumption, it has become recreational rather than problematic. They predicted that within a few years time, the young people that had not tried drugs would be the minority and therefore be the ‘deviants’. They also argue that post-modern Britain has an increasing issue of globalisation and consumption that has affected the increase of drug use as globalisation means that trade and accessibility of drugs is more common and easier, and having “spare” money due to the labour market and a longer childhood allows young people to consume freely. In this essay I will further discuss the theory of normalisation by Parker et al.

Parker, Williams and Aldridge (2002) use the normalisation theory to measure ‘sensible’ recreational drug use. These drugs include cannabis, amphetamines, LSD and ecstasy, sensible drug use does not include using a combination of these drugs at one time or using them on a daily basis due to addiction (Parker et al., 1998). Parker, Measham and Aldridge (1995) argue that drug use moved from deviant subcultures, such as the Mods and Hippies from the 1960s-1970s, to mainstream youth culture in the 1980s when the “rave scene” occurred. This dance culture became normalised as it was a recreational leisure pursuit of young people that introduced an appealing new drug, ecstasy.

British surveys have shown that the late teens and early twenties are the main users of illicit drugs (ISDD 1994). The normalisation theory was

introduced so to rule out the stigma about young people that take recreational drugs as the majority are not deviant or involved in crime. The trends in drug use have altered from the addiction of hard drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, to drugs that are used by the modern youth culture in leisure activities, including alcohol, cannabis and ecstasy (Muncie 1999). Although this may provoke crime that is out of character due to being under the influence, it does not create a lifestyle of crime which heroin may. For example, in order for class A drug addicts to fuel their habit they turn to criminal acts such as burglary and mugging. Yet when a young person uses ecstasy or cannabis it is for leisure and does not necessarily cause the individual to partake in a criminal offence. However, Professor David Nutt was recently asked to resign as the chair of the ACMD (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs) due to declaring that alcohol and tobacco are more dangerous for the human health than illegal drugs such as ecstasy, LSD and cannabis. He wrote in a paper at King's College, London, that the legal drug alcohol ranks 5th as the most harmful drug. We could therefore argue that the consumption of alcohol is “normal” in society despite the harm it can cause. Also, although

David Nutt – smoking,,, public bans... it is now marginalised

Alcohol is social activity,,, but some become dependant.... abuse of any substance can cause issues to health or impact on family members.

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).

EVALUATION

It is argued that the claims about the normality and extreme use of illicit drugs is over exaggerated and in fact illicit drugs have always been an underlying issue and therefore society has not suffered an instant or radical change due to industrial or post-modern reasons. For example, in 1932 Aldous Huxley discusses a hallucinogen called soma, showing the existence of drugs in previous decades.

“ if ever by some unlucky chance such a crevice of time should yawn in the solid substance of their distractions, there is always soma, delicious soma, half a gramme for a half holiday, a gramme for a weekend, two grammes for a trip to the gorgeous East, three for a dark eternity on the moon.” (Huxley, 1932: 49)

Illicit drugs have always been present within society but throughout time the drugs have changed to match different subcultures and trends, such as hippies in the 1970s were associated with using LSD, Mods in the 1960s were associated with amphetamines and today's youth culture is associated with “ dance drugs” such as ecstasy (South, 1997).

LOOK AT S+N.. difference between frequency and normality

Shiner and Newburn (1997) argue that the normalisation theory focuses on the measure of lifetime illicit drug use. They point out that if evidence of drug use is measured in shorter time frames such as within the last month or week, there is a dramatic decline in the results of illicit drug use. This is also relevant to the media panic over ‘dance drugs’ such as ecstasy, amphetamines and LSD in which the media has exaggerated a high rate of use within youth culture. Yet ecstasy is one of the least addictive drugs and tends to be taken less regularly, for example when someone takes an ecstasy pill in a clubbing atmosphere they are less likely to consume alcohol which can be an equally as dangerous drug if drunk in excess (Coleman, 1992).

Shiner and Newburn also point out that when time frames such as whether or not the respondent has used any ‘dance drugs’ in the last year are used, it was found that one in twenty young people said they had. Also, only one in four 16 to 25 year olds said they had used cannabis, the most commonly used illicit drug, in the last year.

Overall, Shiner and Newburn criticise the normalisation theory as although there is an increase in the numbers of young people using illicit drugs, it overgeneralizes young people as it does not necessarily mean that they all see it as normal due to conservative norms and values about drug use still existing to many people and they view illicit drug use as wrong or bad. This challenges the argument by Parker et al. (1995) that soon the young people that were not using drugs would be in the minority and therefore be the “deviant” subculture. However, it is important to remember that Shiner and

Newburn are evaluating the work of Parker et al. in 1995. Their work about normalisation in 1998 does acknowledge that young people view each drug differently and their decision to take illicit drugs is “ complex” and “ sophisticated” (Barton, 2003: 121-122).

It could also be argued that illicit drug use only appears to have become normalised due to a moral panic, a term that is commonly used to describe media stimulated over-reaction to subcultures, such as youth groups and issues within society. Stanley Cohen (1973) coined the term ‘ moral panic’ in the 1960s as a result of over exaggerated reports about the feud between the Mods and Rockers, he noted that moral panics tend to focus on topics concerning the actions of young people. Other sociologist such as Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) suggest that moral panics occur when a proportion of society feel that the folk devils (as suggested by the media) have become a threat to society and social order. For example, when the rave scene occurred there was a new folk devil associated with the acid house dance culture and ecstasy that became normalised among the youth culture.

Ecstasy has had huge media coverage, especially since the death of Leah Betts in 1995 after she took one ecstasy pill on her 18th birthday. Leah collapsed in to a coma four hours after taking the tablet and died three days later. The police claimed the death was due to the tablet being contaminated, this resulted in the media using the tragedy to create a panic about the effects of the drug within society. However, it was later revealed that Leah did not die directly from the ecstasy pill but from drinking an excessive amount of water in reaction to dehydration from the drug.