ABSTRACT

Aims: This paper explores the pleasures and harms experienced by a group of young people during and after ‘party drug’ use.

Methods: Fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken among regular recreational users of ecstasy and methamphetamine. Weekly participant observation took place in licensed venues and private homes. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 core participants.

Findings: There were four primary domains of both pleasure and harm experienced by participants that included: a) elevated and lowered mood, b) heightened and impaired cognition, c) economic availability and unavailability, and d) enhanced and troubled friendships. Two key points are made in the analysis of these issues. Firstly, it is unhelpful to discuss the negative consequences of drug use without appreciating the positive aspects, as one is not typically experienced without the other. Secondly, it is important to situate the experience of drug-related harms within broader life circumstances as they do not become a deterrent until they interfere with lifestyle priorities that shift over time.

Conclusions: Without appreciation of aspects such as pleasure and understanding the broader social, cultural and economic circumstances of young people, prevention and health promotion messages that seek to reduce drug use are unlikely to resonate with young people.
TITLE

“What goes up must go down”: An exploration of the pleasures and drug-related harms experienced by a sample of regular ‘party drug’ users over time

INTRODUCTION

The past twenty years has seen a significant increase in the recreational use of ‘party drugs’, such as ecstasy and methamphetamine, in social contexts by young people pursuing pleasure in their leisure time (Duff, 2005; Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which young people characterise the harms that they experience from recreational party drug use, how these harms are experienced over time, and how they are positioned with respect to the positive aspects of drug use. Drawing on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with a group of 25 young people from Melbourne, Australia, this paper explores the way in which these party drug users describe the pleasures and harms they experienced during and after extended sessions of party drug use.

The pursuit of pleasure, enhancement of socialising with friends and ‘switching off’ from work and other responsibilities have long been acknowledged as key motivators for recreational party drug use (Dance, 1991; Hunt & Evans, 2008; Measham, 2004b; Moore, 1995; Olsen, 2009; Parker, 2007). At the same time, party drug use has been linked to negative outcomes such as short-term memory loss, problems with concentration and low mood and depression in the days(s) following use (Gouzoulous-Mayfrank & Daumann, 2006; Gowing, Henry-Edwards, Irvine, & Ali, 2002), as well acute consequences such as increased blood pressure and heart rate, hypertension, hyperthermia, hyponatremia, tremors, irritability, anxiety, paranoia, aggression, fatigue, nausea, decreased appetite, dehydration and trismus.

While previous research has documented these benefits and harms, they have tended to be dealt with separately, rather than together (Demant, 2013), which is unhelpful given that many young recreational drug users actively weigh the benefits and harms of drug use when making decisions about their use (Parker et al., 1998; Plant & Plant, 1992; Shewan, Dalgarno, & Reith, 2000). This paper uses an ethnographic approach to examine the way in which recreational drug users describe the benefits and harms of party drug use. Such an approach offers the opportunity to explore how these experiences change over time, and how they are positioned in the context of broader life circumstances and the importance placed on other aspects of lifestyle. I argue that experience of harms from party drug use cannot be understood without appreciation of the positive aspects of use, and that both experience of pleasure and harm change over time as priorities and lifestyle factors shift and develop. These are important considerations for the development of drug prevention and health promotion policies.

METHODS

Data presented in this paper are derived from ethnographic research conducted among a group of approximately 25 ecstasy and methamphetamine users in Melbourne, Australia. Ethnography was considered the most appropriate research method to understand how drugs are used and represented in everyday practice, with the focus on the ‘lived experience’ of the research participants enabling an exploration of the social meanings that shape their practices (Duff, Johnston, Moore, & Goren, 2007; Pearson, 2001). Access to these party drug users
was facilitated via four pre-existing contacts of the author, all of whom were part of the same social network. At the inception of fieldwork, I made contact with six young people I believed to be regular consumers of party drugs. After a lengthy discussion about the research and its aims, and a process of informed consent, four of these six young people agreed to let me accompany them on their next occasion of party drug use (the other two contacts reported having stopped using party drugs). Through time spent in licensed venues with these four contacts over a number of weeks, access to their friends occurred through a process of snowballing, and relationships were slowly formed with these additional participants, with those initial contacts facilitating introductions and playing the role of ‘cultural broker’ (Moore, 1992). All potential participants were informed about the study after a short period of rapport building and all provided informed consent before appearing in fieldnotes and being involved in interviews. Only two people in the broader social network refused to provide consent. As a regular ‘clubber’ myself, I was familiar with the environments in which participants frequented, which enabled me to ‘fit in’ and socialise with minimal disruption to the natural flow. However, my role as a partial insider also raised some challenges, the most obvious being the difficulty I faced in balancing both professional relationships and friendships with participants, both during fieldwork and during analysis (see also Hodkinson, 2005; Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1987).

Data collection involved weekly sessions of participant observation with key participants over fourteen months. Observational research was undertaken in a variety of Melbourne’s pubs, bars, clubs and music festivals, as well as private homes, typically on weekends. Time was also spent with participants during the week when no drugs were used in order to gain broader insight into the meaning of drug use and where it was positioned within their lifestyle.
(see also Moore, 1992). Thorough fieldnotes (Adler & Adler, 1994) were written following these sessions.

In order to complement the data collected through ethnographic fieldwork, and to conduct a more focused investigation of key topics, in-depth qualitative interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) were conducted with the 25 core group members. The interview schedule was semi-structured, which allowed a certain level of control over the questions while also allowing interviewee responses to shape the flow of conversation and issues discussed. Interviews took between 30 minutes and two hours and all interviewees were reimbursed AUD$30 for their time, knowledge and any travel costs, as is common practice in Australian alcohol and other drug research (Ritter, Fry, & Swan, 2003). Interviews were professionally transcribed. Ethics approval for the research was granted by Curtin University of Technology’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

Analysis of fieldnotes and interview transcripts was undertaken using computer software NVivo9. Data were systematically analysed for key themes as well as points of divergence. Narratives were analysed using thematic and content analysis and the data was explored for regularities, variations and contrasts between fieldnotes and interviews. A broad coding scheme was initially developed, which was refined over time. Pleasure and harm, and the positive and negative consequences of party drug use, were commonly identified themes throughout fieldnotes and interview transcripts. In particular, there were four primary domains of both pleasure and harm identified through analysis, and these are discussed in order of their frequency as observed in fieldwork and reported in interviews.
PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR PATTERNS OF DRUG USE

Participants were aged between 19 and 30 years (with most between the ages of 21-25), were divided equally by gender, and were almost exclusively of Anglo-Australian background.

Participants had varying levels of education, with some holding undergraduate degrees, some having completed secondary school, and the rest having completed only some secondary schooling before leaving to commence a trade apprenticeship. All were either employed or studying full-time during the course of fieldwork. No participants were married but more than half were in long-term de facto relationships. More than half of participants lived with their parents, with the rest either renting with friends, and a minority living in their own homes. Geographically, they lived within a 10km radius of one another in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. Participants had no history of criminal activity and none had accessed treatment specifically for alcohol and other drug problems, although two members had been treated for depression and another two had been treated for anxiety.

Most participants reported similar histories of alcohol and other drug use, smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol at weekend parties in their early teens, before using cannabis at around 15 years of age, and ecstasy and methamphetamine at around 19 years. Most considered their progression from tobacco, alcohol and cannabis to other drugs as inevitable and unexceptional (see also Mayock, 2005). All participants reported previous use of ecstasy and methamphetamine powder, with most reporting previous cannabis and cocaine use, but only half reporting previous ketamine use. Use of crystal methamphetamine and GHB was less frequent and no participants had ever used heroin. Preferred combinations of drugs included a strategic mix of both ‘uppers’ and ‘downers’, including alcohol, ecstasy and
methamphetamine, and on occasion, cannabis (see also Boys, Lenten, & Norcross, 1997; Hunt, Evans, Moloney, & Bailey, 2009; Wilson, 2006).

Most of the sample reported established and stable patterns of ecstasy and methamphetamine use following an initial experimentation period. Most participants reported using ecstasy and methamphetamine regularly (weekly to monthly), but with periods where they would use more frequently, particularly during the summer. During the fieldwork period participants tended to go out weekly or fortnightly on weekends. Sessions of alcohol and party drug use generally lasted anywhere from eight to 48 hours. There were three sequential components that constituted a typical night out. The first component involved ‘pre-going out’ drinks at a private home, or a restaurant, pub or bar; this phase was marked by the consumption of large amounts of alcohol, and sometimes methamphetamine. Following this, participants typically moved to a nightclub setting where they continued to drink alcohol but also used larger amounts of methamphetamine, and began to use small amounts of ecstasy. Finally, participants returned to a private home for the ‘after-party’, where they began consuming larger amounts of ecstasy and, on occasion, cannabis (see xxx 2012 for more detail about the drug use rituals performed by participants).

Participants were using higher amounts of ecstasy and methamphetamine than the national estimates. For example, women estimated that they averaged around 2.7 ecstasy pills per session, while men averaged around 5.3 pills per session. Both of these averages are significantly higher than the average of 1.6 pills per session reported in Australia’s National Drug Strategy Household Survey (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008). Both

1 Australians are amongst the highest consumers of ecstasy and methamphetamine in the world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010), with 17.0% of 18-29 year olds having ever consumed ecstasy and 10.2% having ever used methamphetamine (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011).
men and women reported using around half a gram of methamphetamine over a typical session (the national average is 0.4 grams - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008). Ten participants preferred smoking methamphetamine as their primary route of administration and the rest preferred snorting methamphetamine.

While this group of drug users are considered ‘recreational’, and in using this term I refer to Moore’s (1993, p. 12) application of the term as those for whom drug use is “primarily an expressive and leisure-oriented activity”, they might still be considered ‘regular’ and/or ‘heavy’ users of ecstasy and methamphetamine. However, it is important to note, that I am not talking about dependent drug users in this paper. It is also important to note that majority of ecstasy and methamphetamine users do not become dependent on the drug, although are still likely to experience a range of harms from drug use (see also Allott & Redman, 2006; Duff et al., 2007; Hansen, Maycock, & Lower, 2001; Hunt & Evans, 2008; Lee et al., 2007; McElrath & McEvoy, 2001; Pennay & Lee, 2008; Shewan et al., 2000)

EXPERIENCE OF PLEASURE AND HARM

Changes in mood: Euphoria and ‘The sads’

It has been well established that party drug use results in positive mood changes, including among other things, feelings of euphoria, joy and happiness (Hunt & Evans, 2008; Measham, 2004b; Moore, 1995; Olsen, 2009). Indeed, participants in this research also experienced pleasure through mood elevation during sessions of ecstasy and methamphetamine use. Take for example, the following fieldnote, which presents evidence of euphoria, joy, happiness:

Half an hour after everyone took their white turtle [a type of ecstasy pill] the living room turned into a nightclub. The music was put up to full ball [volume]
and everyone began dancing around energetically. Sarah said to me: “oh my god, I’ve never felt like this, it’s like the first time, oh my god, oh my god, this is the best feeling ever!” Jason came up to me and knelt down in front of me (I was sitting down) and put his head on my lap and said: “I love pills [ecstasy]. I love them. I’m so happy. I want some more”. Sarah and Jess got up on the bar and were dancing. Myself and Tico were the only ones who weren’t dancing, but Tico was sitting there with his eyes closed and a couple of times he yelled out: “oh yeah!” and “this is the shit!”

The positive mood-related aspects of methamphetamine and ecstasy use were nicely summed up by Corey during an interview:

> With speed [methamphetamine] you look good, you feel good, you’re alert, you’re chatting with everyone, you’re very social, people want to approach you, you look approachable and you are, you dance, you’ve got a lot of energy and you go home still in a grouse [great] mood … I suppose the pros of pills [ecstasy] is that you only need a little pill to make you feel fucking unbelievable (Corey, male, 22 years).

Terms such as ‘euphoric’, ‘loved up’, ‘awesome’, ‘wicked’ and ‘unbelievable’ featured heavily in fieldnotes in relation to the positive effects of party drugs. However, in contrast, the experience of low mood in the days following use of ecstasy and methamphetamine use was also commonly observed and reported. For some participants, mood-related problems surfaced 1-4 days after a session of drug use. For example, if a combination of ecstasy and methamphetamine was consumed on Saturday night and Sunday, some participants noticed negative effects on Sunday, but most occurred between Monday and Wednesday. For this reason, the phrases ‘blue Tuesday’, ‘terrible Tuesday’ and ‘wobbly Wednesday’ were
sometimes used to describe the negative mood-related consequences of these drugs. Grumpiness and agitation were two of the more frequently noted mood disturbances, and anger and frustration to lesser degrees. However, the most significant mood-related harm experienced was low mood, which participants termed ‘the sads’. For some participants ‘the sads’ were seen as fairly superficial and as the result of a chemical ‘low’ after a weekend ‘high’. Take, for example, the following comment from Jay:

   What goes up must come down I guess and you go from the feeling of heightened self confidence to a bit of self worthlessness, you start to doubt a few things (Jay, male, 23 years).

However, for others, the sads were more significant and, over time, developed into more enduring mood-related problems. Consider the following email from Jason, taken from a fieldnote:

   I am not a mentally strong person as you know... so every weekend that I do get on it [take drugs] I certainly feel it during the week. It takes me below that level that I should be. Other people can get on it on the weekend and still be able to keep their head above water and they don’t notice it like I do (Jason, male, 24 years).

It is important to note that not all participants experienced low mood in the days following party drug use, but for those that did, the experience of the ‘sads’ tended to become more common and more challenging the longer they had been using party drugs. For example:

   For the first year I was fine and then in the last six months to a year I started freaking out and I’d get really depressed and the come down would be like terrible and I would freak out and cry and scream ... like Monday, Tuesday, I’d
still be freaking out to the point where I wouldn’t want to see anyone or speak to anyone, I’d be that flat. Then after a while of that I got sick of all the crying and carrying on and so I stopped using ... I think there’s a point for everyone; it’s just different depending on how you use, how often you use, what your routine is during the week, what you’re like (Zoe, female, 24 years).

For Zoe, her experience of the sads became too frequent and too concerning for any mood-related pleasures of drug use to outweigh these negative consequences. For others, low mood sometimes manifested in, or compounded feelings of, regret. For example:

In the days afterwards, I dunno, I don’t feel right, it’s like argh, what am I doing? Why did I just waste that whole weekend when I have so much work to do and why am I wasting all that time when I could be doing something so much more worthwhile and creating so much more for myself and my life? (A.J., male, 22 years).

Here A.J. is suggesting that his priorities have begun to shift and party drug use is negatively affecting his pursuit of these goals. For many participants, as they aged from their early twenties to their mid-twenties, priorities began evolving and drug use became something that was positioned as negatively affecting progression in other aspects of their life, which hadn’t been the case earlier, either because they did not experience low mood during the initial period of their party drug use, or because they were focused on pursuing identity through leisure, heightened mood and pleasure. However, over time many participants (but certainly not all of them) experienced a shift in focus that saw them pursuing identity through work or other “more worthwhile” pursuits, as verbalised by A.J.
Being ‘scattered’: Cognitive enhancement and cognitive impairment

As with mood, participants experienced both positive and negative effects in relation to cognition, during and after the use of ecstasy and methamphetamine. The term ‘scattered’ was often used to describe altered cognition, which took both positive and negative forms. During acute (particularly ecstasy) intoxication, participants would often engage in what they termed ‘scatter talk’ or performed ‘scatter shows’. ‘Scatter talk’ describes a situation when someone makes a statement or asks a question out of context that does not make sense (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=scatter+talk). This is often involuntary and uncontrollable, but not always. Participants often engaged in scatter talking (only in private homes) when under the influence of ecstasy, which sometimes led to the participants role playing other characters and staging dramatic performances. Consider the following fieldnote in relation to the positive cognitive effects of party drug use:

A.J. was becoming more comical as the night wore on. He was in a world of his own, performing his own ‘shows’ and role-playing different characters such as an old man complaining about the ‘youth of today’, complete with old man accent and mannerisms. Later in the day he decided to organise a ‘Workers Rights Movement’. He was scatter talking and demanding that everyone else take part in this protest. Everyone was allocated roles such as the representative of the Transportation Authority, Industrial Rights speaker and Lesbian Rights Activist, and given lines of speech. Everyone stood in a line and took it in turn to chant the lines that A.J. had made up. Everyone took it in turns to say their bit about their sector and then all walked together – ‘towards a better Australia’, chanting and protesting (A.J., male, 22 years).
This was just one example of the type of ‘scatter shows’ that often took place when participants were heavily intoxicated under the influence of ecstasy. Other ways that scatter talking manifested included participants making out-of-context lengthy intelligent speeches about serious political issues or comedic speeches about mundane issues. A number of participants reported feeling that ecstasy enabled them to speak more freely and intelligently. For example:

    When I’m on ecstasy I feel smarter … when I’m sitting around talking I feel like what’s coming out sounds really good and really intelligent and also because when I’m not on ecstasy … I’m not going to talk until I’ve got something that’s proper to say, I’m not just going to blurt stuff out but when I’m on ecstasy, I’ll start talking and saying stuff to people that I might want to say anyway but I’m too reserved to say that when I’m not on ecstasy. I quite like that effect (Nicole, female, 21 years).

While Nicole and many others reported positive effects on cognition while under the influence of party drugs, negative consequences associated with cognition, such as short-term memory loss and particularly difficulties in concentration, were also reported by some participants in the days following party drug use. In this context, the use of the term ‘scattered’ had negative connotations. When Julie was asked to define being ‘scattered’, she replied:

    When I’m scattered I’m not in happy ecstasy land and I’m not in reality. I’m somewhere in limbo and I’m not functioning, everything is 10 times harder than it should be, I make stupid mistakes, I’m all over the shop (Julie, female, 24 years).
For many participants, the biggest potential consequence of being scattered was its impact on study or work. For example:

I was just so tired and just wanted to sleep and my concentration was shot, it was hard to concentrate and just to think, like problem solving and that when you’re trying to think, you just get confused with what you’re thinking about (Brendan, male, 21 years).

For other participants, lapses in short-term memory after weekends of heavy drug use had led to situations in which they were embarrassed or felt inadequate before their colleagues or employers:

Sometimes if I’ve had a big weekend I’ll have memory lapses and things like that. I’ll go to work and I’ll have to rehearse in my mind what I’m going to say to my boss because I’m not as articulate as I’d like to be. I don’t like looking like a fool, I don’t like that because I know people pick up on it and go, ‘What the fuck is he talking about, what’s going on here?’ (A.J., male, 22 years).

As with mood-related consequences, some participants made the decision to cease using party drugs when the cognitive impacts on work or study became too significant to bear the costs on other aspects of their lives, for example:

Awhile ago I had a period of about four or five months where I knew that my work was suffering and I knew that my work ethic had changed and my motivation and all that sort of stuff. But I made a conscious decision then to get off it [the drugs] and stop … I’ve just got different goals in life now. I want to do something with my career and that and if I was going to keep partying and keep
doing all this stuff now I was never going to get anywhere (Brendan, male, 21 years).

Here, Brendan is suggesting that his decision to cease party drug use was related to his shifting priorities, and re-focus on career, and the cognitive impairment he experienced after sessions of party drug use were conflicting with his ability to achieve these goals.

**Finances: Fun versus financial loss**

During the course of fieldwork, participants constantly reported tensions between their desire to save money and their desire to spend money. It was estimated from participants during interviews that they spent an average of AUD$250 on a typical weekend, but some often spent significantly more. Some participants regularly procured a gram of methamphetamine for a weekend sessions (at a cost of approximately AUD$200 per gram) while others bought and consumed five or more ecstasy pills during these sessions (at a cost of approximately AUD$25 per pill). Some female participants purchased new clothes for nights out, which contributed to the cost of their partying. For many, spending this money was an accepted consequence of party drug use, and some even derived pleasure from having money available to buy expensive tickets to music festivals, clothes for partying and covering the cost of others’ party drugs. Take for example, the following comments from participants who seemed unconcerned about the money spent on partying:

It’s just a risk I’m willing to take for now [drug use]. While I can afford it, while I can enjoy myself and look back at fun times knowing that young will be young, and I had a crack and experienced it and I’ll move on to a certain stage in my life later on (Jay, male, 23 years).
I’m just always one to go out and have a good time, I’ve sort of got that attitude, I’ll worry about it later … The way I see it, I’m not the type to let things like money get me down or anything like that. There are a lot worse things than money. If someone wants to come and repossess the car, they can come and get it; it’s just a car … I just have to have a good time (Corey, male, 22 years).

However, some participants constantly lamented the cost of party drug use, and the impact it had on their inability to save money, or the loss of existing financial savings. Three participants reported being in debt due to their drug use, either owing money to a dealer or owing money on their credit card due to not having enough money to pay their bills. Most participants avoided getting into debt because they had fairly high levels of disposable income and could afford to purchase drugs regularly; however, over half of participants reported that their weekend partying was directly to blame for their lack of savings. For example:

It’s definitely affected [my] finance[s]. If I did the sums in my head now I’d say one week out of every month over the last three years, so what’s that, once a month over 36 months, at AUD$300-$400 [per month], you’re looking at some big bucks that I could have had a house by now or at least a deposit on a house or something. Which is another reason that I’m starting to go, what am I doing? (A.J., male, 22 years).

Many participants attributed their lack of savings to their drug use, and others wondered if they could have been on higher salaries had they not been scattered at work or had not lacked motivation to pursue their careers more actively. However, participants happily made the decision to make financial sacrifices for the benefits they derived from their drug use, until they reached a point where they started regretting the ‘lost’ money, as evidenced by A.J.’s
comment above, that this reflection about finances was another reason (along with the aforementioned mood and cognitive issues) that he had decided to reduce his party drug use. For most participants, it was not until they had decided to move on to the next stage of their lives, which for most involved contemplating the purchase of real estate, and found themselves in the same financial situation they had been in three or four years earlier, that they began to regret the financial outlay on partying. Most participants who purchased real estate during the fieldwork period ceased or reduced their party drug use, as evidenced in the following fieldnote:

I spoke to Stacey on the phone and she informed me she was going to an engagement party on Saturday night, but would not be meeting the rest of the crew at the club afterwards because she couldn’t afford it. She said she and Michael [her partner] wouldn’t be able to go out for another month, which she was disappointed about but resigned to. She said she had to weigh up the dint in her social life with the bigger picture of their new house and mortgage.

**Relationships: The enhancement and loss of friendships**

The benefits of party drug use for enhancing social relationships has been well established (Dance, 1991; Moore, 1995; Olsen, 2009), and indeed, was both observed during fieldwork and heavily endorsed by participants. In particular, it was evident that ecstasy had the potential to facilitate intimate moments and to strengthen and deepen friendships. For example:

I think the best thing about it [ecstasy] is just getting to know people. You never really get to know people anymore, I think at school and all that sort of stuff you get close bonds but as you get older you don’t get to spend time with people but
when you’re on ecstasy you do, because you’re just in a room with 10, 20, maybe 50 people and you’re constantly talking and just getting to know things about people. I think in that respect it’s a good thing, you can have some great conversations with some people and probably talk, not necessarily to people you wouldn’t talk to at other times but say things that, usually nice things that you wouldn’t normally say to people and I think it’s definitely brought me a lot closer to people that I wouldn’t be so close with. It’s just a social thing. My life is pretty much me and my partner, and my business. If I didn’t have the social side to it, then I’d be quite lonely to be honest (Michael, male, 25 years).

Similarly, during a session of fieldwork, I witnessed the following conversation between Jess and Sarah (both 24 years of age):

Later in the night Jess said to Sarah, “you know it is drugs that brought us together. It’s a friendship based on drugs. But it’s so much more than that you know. I know they’re friendships that will last forever, but they started because of drugs. How good are drugs!” Sarah concurred with Jess’ statement that these friendships would last beyond drug use. She said “I’ve said that all along the drugs possibly brought us together but they’re not necessarily going to keep us together. Because I am just over the moon with the friendships that I have and wouldn’t change it because I decided to stop taking drugs or because of any other reason really”.

However, while many participants reported many and varied social benefits of party drug use, many also reported that illicit drug use created problems for their long-term friendships with non- or ex-drug users. This was supported by many occasions of significant conflict erupting between participants and non- or ex-drug using friends during fieldwork. Most of these
episodes of conflict occurred as a result of non- or ex-drug using friends negatively appraising the drug use of participants, or because participants had stopped socialising with non- or ex-using friends. It was common for participants to attempt to maintain relationships with friends who did not consume party drugs by spending the early period of a Friday or Saturday evening drinking alcohol with them at pubs or clubs and then meeting up with fellow drug-using friends later in the evening. However, conflict still often occurred when non-drug users became aware of this drug use and verbally disapproved.

As time wore on, episodes of conflict became less frequent as many members of the group slowly lost contact with people who objected to their drug use, and many of these friendships were lost. From the perspective of ex- or non-drug users, these friendships were damaged because their drug using friends no longer included them in their social activities. For example, Hayley made the following statement during a session of fieldwork:

It’s changed my life quite a lot having stopped [using drugs]. I reckon it’s had a real impact on my friendships. I reckon that’s why I don’t get included as much anymore, I just don’t fit in anymore (Hayley, female, 24 years).

However, participants offered a very different interpretation of the changes in these relationships; for them, these friendships became unsustainable because of the continual criticism and judgment they received from ex- or non-drug users. Take the following fieldnote, for example:

At around 6am Hayley suddenly asked everyone left at the party if they’d taken any drugs tonight. Everyone nodded and she said: “am I seriously the only person here who’s not on drugs? Oh my god, that’s ridiculous. Does anyone else see how pathetic that is?”
Below is Stacey’s response to such criticism:

I think some people [who don’t use drugs] are definitely more distant than they were before. A lot of people perceive it to be very different to how it is too and they make us out to be a little bit evil because of what we do (Stacey, female, 24 years).

The loss of these friendships was a significant social consequence of the group’s regular use of ecstasy and methamphetamine, but as with other issues, these were generally accepted consequences of party drug use until participants began to reduce or cease their use. It was once participants ceased or began reducing their drug use that many started regretting the loss of these friendships and attempted to resurrect them. For example:

I lost all contact with the girls that I grew up with for a couple of years and it wasn’t until I sort of stopped and had a break [from drug use] that I got the friendships back (Susie, female 22 years).

However, for others, these friendships were irreparable as too much conflict had occurred over time.

**DISCUSSION**

This paper has explored both the pleasures and harms experienced by a group of regular ecstasy and methamphetamine users in Melbourne, Australia, over a period of fourteen months. The ethnographic research approach was particularly useful for understanding not only the benefits and negative consequences of drug use experienced by these drug users, but the meaning and importance ascribed to these issues over time and across changes in lifestyle.
and priorities. While the pleasures associated with party drug use observed during fieldwork and reported by participants were congruent with previous research in this field (Dance, 1991; Hunt & Evans, 2008; Measham, 2004b; Moore, 1995; Olsen, 2009; Parker, 2007), the primary harms experienced by this group of regular party drug users only correlated somewhat with previous literature. Factors such as low mood and cognitive impairment in the days following use have been previously reported (Gouzoulis-Mayfrank & Daumann, 2006; Gowing et al., 2002); while more enduring consequences such as regret over the money spent on partying resulting in lack of savings and loss of friendships with non drug users, have received much less attention. While typically reported harms such as increased heart rate and anxiety, nausea and vomiting, and jaw clenching and teeth grinding, were commonly observed and reported consequences of party drug use, these harms were not considered significant enough to deter use, particularly in the context of the many pleasures that accompanied party drug use. The four negative consequences of party drug use identified in this article were the main factors that prompted a reflection of continued use among participants, and for some resulted in a reduction or cessation of party drug use.

There are two key points made in this analysis that are worthy of consideration. The first is that it is unhelpful to engage in a discussion about the negative consequences of drug use without an appreciation of the positive aspects. The second is that both pleasure and harm cannot be understood without situating them within the broader context of the drug users’ lifestyle and the various social, cultural and economic factors that shape their choices and identities at different points in time. I address with these two key points in turn, and reflect on the implications for prevention and harm reduction policy.

Firstly, as aforementioned, previous research on party drug use has tended to focus on either the positive or negative effects of drug use, situating pleasure in opposition to risk or harm
(Demant, 2013). This is an unhelpful dichotomy because as was the case with these young party drug users, experiences of negative consequences such as low mood or concentration could not have been achieved without firstly experiencing elevated mood and enhanced cognition. Many participants were acutely aware of the relationship between pleasure and harm, as evidenced by Jay’s comment “what goes up must go down”. The risks of low mood, impaired cognition, and loss of finances and friendships were therefore accepted consequences of party drug use, as also pointed out by Jay in his comment: “It’s just a risk I’m willing to take for now”. This is evidence of the kind of cost-benefit analyses undertaken by many party drug users when making decisions about their use (see also Parker et al., 1998; Plant & Plant, 1992; Shewan et al., 2000). Such findings have important implications for prevention and health promotion policies and provide some insight as to why harm reduction policies are not always adopted by young drug users. Harm reduction messages developed for party drug users that focus on negative consequences without acknowledging the associated pleasures of drug use inevitably fail to appreciate the dynamic and strategic ways that young drug users negotiate both pleasure and risk, and further consideration should be placed into incorporating pleasure in harm reduction messages (see also Pennay, 2012; Pennay & Moore, 2010).

The second major point up taken up in this analysis is that it is important to situate both the pleasures and drug-related harms experienced through recreational drug use within the period of life in which participants were located. In keeping with many of the social, cultural and economic changes explored in the introduction, participants placed little emphasis on saving money or career advancement during the initial period of their party drug use, instead choosing to focus on leisure and pleasure. For this reason, the negative consequences of party drug use observed and reported by participants did not act as a deterrent until they
began to compromise the ability of participants to pursue particular goals that shifted and developed over time. Although experiencing negative consequences from party drugs throughout the fieldwork period, most participants tolerated them because the perceived benefits of drug use – in the form of pleasure and sociability – outweighed the harms (see also Parker et al., 1998; Plant & Plant, 1992; Shewan et al., 2000). However, as time progressed, participants increasingly reflected on concerns such as low mood, impaired cognition, their loss of friendships and lack of financial savings, because these consequences began to interfere with their shifting priorities and focus on different aspects of their identity and lifestyles such as career progression and financial independence. This finding also has important implications for drug-related prevention and harm reduction messages aimed at young people, and highlights another reason why public health messages are not always adhered to by young party drug users. For example, messages that focus on experience of low mood or impaired cognition in the days following use are likely to be ignored by young recreational drug users until the individual is in a position where these issues negatively impact their pursuit of various goals or priorities. As a consequence, it is likely that the provision of health promotion information will not incite behaviour change until the message resonates with the circumstances of the individual drug user. One approach might be to target health promotion messages towards young party drug users variably depending on their life course positioning. We need to adopt novel ways of promoting harm reduction that will resonate with the experiences of young recreational drug users, including finding a way to promote ways of consuming party drugs that both maximise pleasure and minimise risk.
REFERENCES


