



## The normalisation thesis – 20 years later

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## EDITORIAL

### The normalisation thesis – 20 years later

In the mid-1990s, a team of UK researchers developed a theoretical framework in which they argued that the use of some illicit drugs – specifically cannabis, nitrates and amphetamines, and equivocally ecstasy – had become ‘normalised’. The proponents of this thesis argued that the recreational use of these drugs had become an unremarkable feature of life for some young people in their pursuit of leisure and pleasure. They also argued that the use of these drugs had become socially and culturally accepted by many members of the non-drug using population and was increasingly culturally embedded in wider society (Measham, Newcombe, & Parker, 1994; Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1995, 1998).

Parker et al. (1998) tracked the drug attitudes and consumption patterns of a cohort of nearly 800 British adolescents over five years and proposed that illicit drug use had moved from the margins of youth culture towards its centre. Their claim was based on the following evidence: (i) an increase in the availability and accessibility of some illicit drugs, (ii) an increase in drug ‘trying’ rates, (iii) increased regular use of some illicit drugs, (iv) high levels of drug knowledge, (v) future intentions to use drugs, and (vi) the cultural accommodation of some illicit drug use (e.g. among non-drug users, in popular culture and in policy).

The normalisation thesis is one of the most significant recent theoretical developments to have emerged in the youth and drug studies literature, because it differed from previous criminological and psychological theories that associated drug use with deviance or resistance, subcultural affiliation, and pathology or disease. Instead, it attempted to explain the significant increase in recreational drug use experienced in the UK at that time by young people of different gender, class and ethnic backgrounds. The normalisation thesis was informed by a body of sociological literature that describes how young post-modern subjects experience life differently than their parents, including a delayed transition to work and starting a family.

It has been over 20 years since the development of the normalisation thesis and in this time a growing literature has debated whether the regular, recreational use of some drugs has indeed become normalised among young people. The normalisation thesis has been explored by researchers in the UK, in other parts of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Some of this work has supported the normalisation thesis or at least elements of it (Bahora, Sterk, & Elifson, 2009; Newcombe, 2007; Taylor, 2000), some has argued that normalised drug use is limited to

particular sections of the population (Duff, 2003, 2005; Holt, 2005; Hutton, 2010; Pearson, 2001), and some has contested it (Blackman, 2007; Gourley, 2004; Shildrick, 2002; Shiner & Newburn, 1997). Further work has focused on differentiated normalisation and reasserted the significance of social class and gender (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Measham, 2002; Shildrick, Simpson, & MacDonald, 2007); as well as on the micro-politics of normalisation (Hathaway, Comeau, & Erickson, 2011; Pennay & Moore, 2010; Rodner Sznitman, 2008) and the tensions between agency and structure in drug careers (Measham & Shiner, 2009).

Twenty years later, it is timely to explore current developments in the normalisation thesis, particularly in the context of growing consensus about the differentiated nature of normalisation and the need to move on from whether it has, or has not occurred. Contemporary work should turn its attention to the processual aspects of normalisation, how the notion of normalised drug use has shaped drug use practices and experiences, processes of denormalisation, and whether additional consequences have arisen from the development of the concept.

Contributions to the special issue come from the UK, Canada and Australia and explore what stable and declining drug use rates among young people mean for normalisation (Williams, 2016) and whether a denormalisation, or renormalisation, of some substance use has occurred, particularly with respect to tobacco and nicotine (Asbridge, Valleriani, Kwok, & Erickson, 2016; Measham, O'Brien, & Turnbull, 2016). Important criminal justice issues such as the normalisation of the social supply of illicit drugs (Coomber, Moyle, & South, 2016) and the incongruence between cannabis policy and community attitudes to cannabis (Asbridge et al., 2016) are explored. Papers also focus on somewhat neglected aspects of normalisation such as gender and ethnicity (Hathaway, Mostaghim, Kolar, Erickson, & Osborne, 2016), socioeconomic status and broader structural factors shaping drug use (O'Gorman, 2016), age and intimate relationships (Green, 2016), the importance of social context (Asbridge et al., 2016; Hathaway et al., 2016) and routes of ingestion (Measham et al., 2016) in understanding processes of normalisation.

The papers in this special issue underline the importance of new empirical work in ensuring the concept of drug normalisation evolves meaningfully with shifting drug trends and attitudes, and so that responses to, and consequences of, normalisation are adequately considered.

What the papers make clear is that normalisation is not a static concept, and needs to be continually reassessed in light of changing drug patterns and styles and the cultural transformation of certain drugs. The papers also suggest avenues for future work on normalisation, including the need for exploration of the extent and nature of normalisation across the age spectrum; the ways in which structure and class shape the process of normalisation; the role of commercial interests in facilitating normalised drug use; the relationship between normalised drug use, stigma, crime and deviance; and how the recreational drug use/problem drug use dichotomy influences processes of normalisation. We also suggest that in future work on normalisation there is a need for innovative methodologies, particularly with regard to online drug economies and the expansion of digital media; and more in-depth qualitative research is needed to better understand the social meanings of drug use, the normative context in which drug use occurs, and the benefits and unintended consequences of normalisation. There is also a need for significant investment in longitudinal studies and less reliance on official statistics; it is notable that the normalisation thesis emerged from a funded longitudinal study and yet there have been very few studies around the world that have replicated that design.

In conclusion, the papers in this special issue illustrate the vitality and continued relevance of normalisation as a way of conceptualising changes in recreational drug use around the world. Never intended as a grand theory of drug use, its value increasingly seems to be due to its fluidity, flexibility and conceptual mutability, allowing for historical and cross cultural accommodation. The strands of the normalisation debate – regarding structure and agency; passion and reason; problems and pleasures; identity and intent – echo core debates within the social sciences more generally so perhaps we should not be surprised about the content or longevity of these discussions and the likelihood that they will remain both unresolved and resonant for drug researchers for some time into the future.

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