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Space and drug use in recreational settings

What method(s) do you use in your individual field(s)/practice to think about the issue of sharing and negotiating public space in relation to drug consumption?

In order to continue sharpening our understanding of the practices of young people who use drugs in recreational settings like festivals, clubs, and house parties, we favour ethnographic fieldwork. This immersive approach to data gathering allows us to closely follow the drug using trajectory in a drug using space, such as spending a day with an intimately connected peer group at a music festival and observing their drug using practices. This method also includes observing how party goers in general behave from a distance. Supplemental sources of information, such as venue staff, can also be sought out to provide a fuller understanding of the culture we seek to learn from.

We also make use of qualitative semi-structured interviews, asking participants questions, prompting them to talk about their understanding and knowledge about their drug use. An example of this would be posing the open-ended question: “what makes you feel safe when you are partying and what makes you feel unsafe?”

We find value in this method of research as it allows us to get close to both the individuals we are seeking to learn from and the spaces in which they are enacting out risk behaviours. This allows us to engage more deeply when thinking about the relationship between spaces, drugs, and the people that use them.

What concrete strategy/strategies have you used to date to deal with this issue? Please provide one concrete example.

During my fieldwork at a Dutch electronic music festival in the heart of the city, I was with a participant, amidst many dancers, and he asked his friend to keep an

eye out for security and half-crouched to the floor. Shortly thereafter I asked what that he was doing and he indicated to me that, “One stupid move on my part, like sniffing some ketamine without checking to see who’s looking, and I could be thrown out and miss the rest of the party.” Based on my observation and questioning, it was clear that these festival goers saw uniformed individuals as a threat to their fun. It was of interest to me that a service with the intention of promoting safety could be interpreted as the complete opposite, by the individuals that it aimed to serve. As well, this story serves as a good example of how public spaces can be, with the help of observant and alert friends, made private.

This example of young people using and relying on others to keep an eye out for each other, is an example of a group of strategies that we refer to as ‘harm reduction from below’, self-developed and shared practices amongst peer groups that aim at maximizing pleasure and minimizing harm.