

Epidemiology meets cultural studies: Studying and understanding youth cultures, clubs and drugs

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Abstract

The public perceptions of clubs and drugs reveal the existence of two opposing discourses. One, an official discourse, characterizes dance events and taking drugs as spaces of excess risk, which need to be controlled and regulated. The other, as exemplified in accounts of the participants themselves, emphasizes the pleasures and importance of these activities. The dichotomous nature of the discourses is not that surprising as many researchers have noted that adult concerns with youthful practices have been witnessed many times before. What is more surprising is the extent to which a division between perspectives on and approaches to understanding raves and drug use can be found not just in the contrast between official/government approaches and dance event participants, but also within scholarly work. Scholarship on raves, the dance scenes, and club drugs can be divided into two immensely differing traditions: epidemiological and cultural studies approaches. The cultural studies approach acts as a much-needed corrective to the epidemiological research through its introduction of a focus on pleasure, subjectivity, and social context and by more fully attending to youth perspectives. However, the cultural studies scholarship, itself, has important blindspots, particularly in its underemphasis on the role of drugs within the dance and rave scenes. We will argue for a third approach that utilizes the theoretical and methodological strengths of the cultural studies approach, while combining it with perspectives that allow us to comprehend the role that drugs play within these scenes and the roles of pleasure and risk within them.

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