

01/2014

Normalisation of drug consumption in the past twenty years



The thesis *Sense passar-se de la ratlla* (Without Crossing the Line) describes the process of normalisation of drug consumption occurring in recent years. It also discusses how most of consumers control the most adverse effects of drugs and how it continues to be socially normalised. The thesis shows that drug-related problems are mainly the result of prohibitionist policies, and poses the need to implement new policies that normalise consumption and consumers.

The normalisation of drug consumption has become a sociocultural phenomenon in the past twenty years in Western European countries. This normalisation encompasses both the historic process and the present drug consumption scene. After the heroin crises of the eighties the pattern of drug consumption changed. The consumption of ecstasy, cocaine and cannabis spread among young people at parties, where consumption only played a secondary role in

these people's lives. The new pattern of consumption moved away from the underground world of heroin and meant less problematic consequences. Over the past twenty years drug consumption has stopped causing alarm and an established cultural acceptance has come about. This means that for people involved in the world of drug consumption, taking drugs at a specific time and in a certain context is a functional act, which is accepted and does not bring about rejection. The present situation is a product of the process of normalization. The vast majority of consumption is compatible with having responsibilities as it causes few problems and consumers are able to remain socially integrated. As a result, normalisation is more and more accentuated and this happens even more so as a higher and higher number of the adult population, for generational reasons, has had a satisfactory contact with drugs.

As a result of the process of normalisation, ideas about normalisation have appeared. These delimit acceptable and normal consumption as well as that which is potentially problematic. The acceptance or rejection of consumption is a result of the idea of regulation, which continually evaluates consumption for pleasure. In order to consider consumption to be normal, the concept of regulation evaluates the context, time, frequency and the consequences it causes. The inter-connection of the factors must be compatible with the consumer's responsibilities if consumption is to be kept within the limits of normality. If consumers practise problematic consumption, they will be labelled as problematic and they will have to modify their consumption to keep within normality. In the framework of the consumer society, apart from the concept of regulation, the desire to keep institutionalised helps the vast majority of consumers to avoid developing problems.

The whole process of the normalisation of drug consumption continues to be stigmatised in different formal contexts (workplace, family, etc.) and this is why consumers have to know how to handle this. When faced with interaction, the vast majority choose to compromise, which means that they prefer to hide their consumption to avoid negative consequences, even though they consider the stigmatisation to be out of proportion. Others put themselves in the situation of self-stigmatisation because while they themselves are consumers, they also consider drug consumption to be negative. And the last ones, the "transformers", maintain a political commitment aimed at de-stigmatising the consumers, considering that consumption forms part of society and the fact of consuming should not be hidden. They present themselves in society as consumers in spite of the possible stigmatisation they might suffer. These are the ones who work towards the normalisation of drug consumption.

In the present scene of drug consumption, policies related to drugs continue with the prohibitive model. In spite of the introduction of risk and harm reduction as an effective practice to tackle consumption, moves towards the normalisation of consumption continue to be only a minority. Therefore, in view of the present position of the normalisation of consumption and the normality of consumers, a revision of drug policy has become necessary.

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References

“Sense passar-se de la ratlla. La normalizació dels consums recreatius de drogues”, David Pere Martínez Oró doctoral thesis, read at Department of Social Psychology and supervised by Dr. Joan Pallarés (UdL) and Dr. Joel Feliu (UAB).

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