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Faculty Research

'Club Kids'

Dina Perrone



For my doctoral research in criminal justice, I studied people who identified themselves as the “club kids.” I am not talking about children or teenagers. Rather, these are young adults in their twenties who are well-educated, employed, and they spend most of their weekends using drugs (crystal methamphetamine, GHB, ecstasy, ketamine, marijuana, and cocaine) and going to legal, licensed, dance venues in search for an escape from their mundane workweek. Most of the research on drug users who attend dance clubs has focused on the drugs used, how often they are used, and the quantity used in a given night. My research was focused on understanding these users’ lives, and how these users have successfully avoided hospital visits and arrest. To learn about their behaviors, I “hung out” with them in places where they used drugs so I could observe their behaviors. I went to clubs with them and played the part of a regular dance club attendee for a period of fifteen months. This method of research, called participant observation, is a standard method for gaining insight into the behavior and culture of those who typically are unwilling to reveal information to researchers. My dissertation focuses on what I learned from the “club kids” about using drugs, clubbing, and preventing harms, and suggests some implications for drug policy raised by my findings. (I summarize some of those findings in a sidebar accompanying this article.) In this article, however, I describe the complexities and challenges I faced as a young female conducting this study.

The club kids are a hidden population of drug users who often use in private spaces. They have not been under the supervision of the criminal justice system or the drug treatment system, and therefore, are beyond state control and outside of public view. They are not the poor, minority users we often hear about on the news. Rather, hidden users are usually white, middle to upper class drug users. Studying these individuals is much more difficult than researching those who are in a drug treatment facility, under criminal justice supervision, or visibly using on the street. These hidden drug users often attempt to avoid exposure and detection, making them much harder to locate. They often are employed, married, and have children. In my study, the majority of participants were white (five identified as non-white),

well-educated and affluent. Most of these users were in positions of relative economic power, well-connected both socially and financially. All but one of the participants were either employed or enrolled in post-graduate programs. Five of the participants were in the medical sciences, and one had a Ph.D. in neuroscience. Others included a registered nurse, a surgical resident, a chief resident at a hospital and an occupational therapist. Other participants worked in the business field, such as an owner of an investment bank and an investment banker.

Such well-connected drug users feel they have much to lose by taking part in a research project. Few incentives are available to convince them to participate in a study on their drug use. As a result, the researcher must use the tools available, and be skilled and patient in creating a relationship with these users. Through that relationship, trust can be established and the subjects of the study, hopefully, can feel comfortable and free to disclose their illegal behaviors to the researcher.

Correspondingly, the researcher also must feel comfortable and safe to develop trusting relationships with the drug users. Feeling comfortable is often difficult for the researcher who is studying drug users. These researchers must show they are a part of the group without using, and frequently refusing to use, drugs with them. It is a challenging balancing act to feel safe and be trusted without engaging in those behaviors.

In my particular study, the settings in which these people used drugs complicated my ability to feel comfortable and safe. The dance clubs which these users attended were often structured around sexuality. For example, on one night the party promoters held a clubbing event with a lingerie theme. The club attendees dressed in revealing sleepwear or underwear. While I refused to dress in that attire, to fit-in, I had to look appropriate and appear comfortable. Moreover, since most attendees of dance clubs and bars often seek to meet romantic

or sex partners, approaching, and being approached by, potential research participants while feeling safe was often difficult. As a young, petite, unmarried, female researching drug users in these sexualized settings, I was often placed in situations which I would usually avoid. I was presented with various obstacles in obtaining research participants, developing relationships with the users, and ensuring my safety.



While my dissertation and other publications primarily focused on these drug users' patterns (see the accompanying box for a brief description of the findings), in this account, I describe both the challenges and the successes I experienced conducting this research. Specifically, I explain how my individual characteristics—a young, white female from a working class background—had both advantages and disadvantages in researching this hidden group of drug users in these sexual-themed settings. My gender and sexuality placed me in uncomfortable and often unsafe situations, which ultimately affected my ability to establish research relationships with some of the men in the dance clubs. However, my gender and sexuality also facilitated the development of many trusting relationships with the drug users.

In establishing rapport and trust, it is very important that the researcher spend time with the drug users. In my project, I spent almost every weekend from March 2004 until June 2005 with a group of young adults who went to dance clubs and used drugs. Over this fifteen month period I attended large, legal dance clubs in New York City, Miami, the Jersey Shore, NJ, and the Hamptons in Long Island, NY. To learn about the drug experiences of this group of drug users and to understand how they avoided police detection and medical attention (see box), I employed both participant-observations, and conducted two-hour interviews with eighteen (eight female and ten male) of these users. At the time of the study, those who agreed to an interview ranged in age from twenty-two to thirty-three years.

DANCE CLUBS, SEX AND RESEARCH: THE DISADVANTAGES

Sex was intricately involved in the sale of the dance club experience. The dance clubs were organized around sexual activity from the mating rituals in which the attendees were engaged to the performances the dance clubs provided. The club owners, DJs and party promoters often chose sexualized themes for club parties, such as the Sadoomasochist Party, and were attentive to

all aspects of the clubbing environment to ensure that the sexual themes came to life. For each theme the club was decorated appropriately and the staged perfor-

mances corresponded to that theme. The clubbers also took part in the creation of the sex event as most dressed in costumes reflecting each party's theme.

As I became accepted in the field as a participant, most heterosexual-identified men began to treat me as they would treat

many other women in the dance club, as a single and sexually available woman. Women who have an ambiguous marriage status are more likely to be harassed by men in both sexualized and non-sexualized research settings. While I kept the forged relationships professional, some prospective male participants asked for sex or nudity as payment for their involvement in the study. In one instance, a male told me that he would only agree to participate in a formal interview if he "saw me in a thong," (a request I refused). In many instances during the fieldwork, males made un-welcomed sexual advances. When I began to feel uncomfortable, I often removed myself from the situation.

In addition to the emotional toll these experiences had, they greatly affected the data collection process. I chose not to attend certain events in fear of a sexual attack, and I chose to no longer engage in conversations with some males, often potential study participants, in fear of experiencing additional sexual advances. These decisions about how to address the sexual advances were matters of balancing my safety against my research. I did not want to place myself in a situation where physical harm was possible, but I also did not want to aggravate the men who could have greatly helped or hindered data collection. Since most of the sexual advances came from men who were under the influence of multiple mind-altering substances, I could not effectively predict their behavior. I also feared that their feelings of rejection either would provoke them to ask other participants in my project to not cooperate, and/or perhaps dismantle already forged relationships with participants.

THE ADVANTAGES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE FIELD

In the predominantly male-run dance club industry, being a young, petite, non-pregnant, female also provided advantages in establishing trust. Often I was able to go to the front of very long lines for club entry. Male dance club employees who found me attractive often provided entry into areas in the club usually off limits to club attendees, and I developed a lasting friendship with one

male key informant, Osiris. Isaac, a club employee, who was hopeful (yet unsuccessful) of having sexual relations with me, gave me tours of a club and the DJ booth before the venue opened.

My gender and appearance also allowed me to foster relationships with females in the drug using and clubbing scene. I was invited to their homes and was able to observe their preparation procedures. While at the clubs, the women invited me on their trips to the restroom where they shared secrets, applied makeup and/or fixed their hair. I also gained insight on their perceptions of male-female relationships in the club scene.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I appreciated how a researcher's individual characteristics, such as his or her race, gender, class, and sexuality, shape the interactions with those he or she is studying. While many researchers attempt to remain detached from the research, in an ethnographic study such as this, which employs participant observations and interviews, it is essential to understand the researcher's experiences in collecting data. As I attempted to establish relationships and blend within the dance settings that were often structured around sex, I was groped and solicited for sexual acts. My petiteness and female-ness shaped my decisions to refrain from attending events and to discontinue talking to potential participants when I felt uncomfortable or was concerned for my safety. I also used my petite-ness and female-ness in addition to my age, my race, and my sexual identity to gain access and establish rapport with the attendees in the dance clubs. I altered my appearance to represent myself in the most appropriate and comfortable manner. Throughout my fieldwork, I was in a constant struggle between using my sexuality and gender to my advantage and managing those situations when my sexuality and gender placed me in uncomfortable situations. My emotions, including fear and intimidation, influenced the data collection, but more importantly, greatly affected my overall wellbeing.

College and university institutional review boards, which grant researchers the right to conduct research, have implemented multiple policies to ensure that the rights, safety and health of human subjects are protected. An equal level of concern should be given to the safety of the field researcher. While researchers have to successfully complete a program on studying human subjects, we are not given guidelines on how to ensure our safety and wellbeing in the field. As a result, we are often ill-equipped to address personal challenges, such as sexual harassment, in the field.

To address these issues, manage some of the risks, and reduce some of the harms an ethnographer may suffer, I developed some suggestions for both individual field researchers and research institutions:

The participants in my study began using drugs other than marijuana and alcohol when they were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five years.

The average age of the participants at the time of the study was twenty-seven years, and they had been using drugs for an average of eight years. They all reported having used ecstasy at least once, but most preferred cocaine, crystal methamphetamine, GHB, or ketamine. While these users had been using drugs for most of their adult lives, they successfully stayed outside the criminal justice system, had few (if any) emergency room visits, did not engage in crime to purchase their drugs, and maintained fulltime, above average salaried positions. They attributed their ability to do so to their links to family and work, social and economic resources, social support, and settings of use. Conscious of the potential harms associated with club drugs and the potential damages drug use could have on their careers, these users took steps to avoid the negative consequences traditionally associated with illicit drug use, such as arrest, health consequences, and unemployment.

Many of the club kids were socially, culturally, and financially 'embedded' within conventional society, which in many ways insulated them from harmful consequences associated with their drug use. Their familial responsibilities and employment obligations helped regulate their drug usage. Among their reasons for reducing or discontinuing using drugs were financial obligations, the goal of becoming a parent, obtaining new intimate partners and ending relationships with others. To fulfill their increasing occupational and educational responsibilities, most discontinued, greatly limited or altered their drug use to complete necessary tasks.

Their social capital and social support networks also insulated them from consequences typically associated with drug use. They had access to resources and information on the harmful consequences of the drugs and ways to avoid them. They used this information to reduce the negative effects on their health and their daily living. They monitored their dosage and food intake, and avoided certain drug combinations.

Their social capital further kept them insulated from the police. They did not have to use in heavily policed areas or in plain view on the street. Rather, their use occurred inside clubs, private homes and hotel rooms, where they could hide their consumption.

The settings in which they used drugs also prevented them from using drugs excessively and harmfully. Through learning about the effects of drug combinations and sharing knowledge through social networks, these users chose which drugs to use and when to use them. Most refrained from combining certain substances, such as alcohol and GHB, to avoid possible consequences. This group disapproved strongly of the use of heroin and crack, and they tended to abstain from using them. Finally, in these settings, the users shared information on addressing potential harms, such as flushing out their noses after a night-out snorting ketamine, crystal methamphetamine, or cocaine to avoid growths inside their noses.

The club kids, however, did not always follow their strategies for reducing negative consequences, and at times their methods were ineffective. Some experienced short-term harms, such as being awake for days, not being able to eat and losing large amounts of weight in a short period of time. Others used drugs excessively. Nonetheless, when the club kids flirted with danger, they still managed to remain outside of the criminal justice system.

To ensure safety in the field, researchers should avoid engaging in behaviors that make them exceptionally uncomfortable.

To assist other researchers embarking or working on field projects, and to broaden the understanding of the culture under study, researchers should reflect upon and share their fieldwork experiences.

To prevent and address harmful experiences in the field, research institutions should create and implement legislative safeguards on researcher safety, and devise an independent and confidential research support team. This team, ideally comprised of researchers, lawyers and counselors, could provide an avenue through which field researchers could discuss their experiences and seek guidance on challenges they are confronting in the field.

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