

No. 185

**Rave Encounters and the Meaningfulness of ATS Use:
Realms of 'Alternative' Possibilities in Singapore**

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ISSN 0129-8186
ISBN 981-3033-79-7
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Abstract

Illicit drug use among young people is oftentimes configured in terms of 'social problems' and 'solutions', which, in effect, constructs the recreational use of such stimulants, and those engaged in such activities, as 'wrong', and 'immoral'. Using the case of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) in rave settings, this paper questions the nature of such a 'problem' in Singapore and argues that the imposed constructions of the 'drug problem' neglect a complex of personal and social meanings of ATS users, many of whom have transformed the original authoritative and homogeneous descriptions to possibly include multiple, negotiated meanings collated from their social worlds. These experiences are meaningful for users and that rave-related ATS use and activities provide new possibilities as alternative spaces for users to connect and bond with one another. As such, it gives particular attention to the uses, meanings, and experiences as active ATS users themselves report them. Three broad themes of the ATS experience emerge from the study, namely connectivity, which includes sex and sensuality, altered states of consciousness, and 'resistance'.

Introduction

Globally, illicit drug use, particularly among young people, is oftentimes framed in terms of 'social problems' and 'solutions', both of which are normative statements representing a value and knowledge system that constructs the recreational use of certain stimulants, and those engaged in such activities, as 'wrong', 'immoral', and in need of control. The 'problems' associated with the excessive non-medical use of drugs, including the appearance of various amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS hereafter), have long been considered so dangerous and threatening to social stability and social order that it has occasioned the structuring of various organisations and bureaucracies that focus on the study, management, treatment, and control of drugs and its users. This often saw coordinated efforts among government and non-government organisations (both transnational and local) involved in four key areas, namely that of prevention, enforcement, treatment and rehabilitation, and aftercare. Increasing or introducing harsher

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the XVI International Sociological Association (ISA) World Congress in Sociology in Durban, South Africa, 23-29 July 2006. The author wishes to thank Roxana Waterson, Vineeta Sinha, Kelvin Low, and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on this paper.

punitive sanctions for illicit drug use has also been a key weapon of many nation-states to address the issue.

Competing and extensive explanations from both international and local academic literature to make sense of the drug ‘problem’ have emerged in the context of these changing social milieux and policies, but most of these explanations have been invariably affected by and predicated on the criminal status accorded to drug use, as well as the ideologies that surround drug regulation and legislation. A central and overwhelming assumption that depicts drug users as passive reactors to circumstances, and that assumes subsequent use results from maladaptivity, or in ‘dropping out’ from society, has been built into the measurements used for such studies². In so doing, these works miss or misinterpret the elements that are of central importance to the drug users themselves. As such, a large portion of research on drug use has been epidemiologically, medically and psychologically grounded, though with some important exceptions such as those which deal directly with drug user worlds and experiences (Auld, 1981; Becker, 1967; Goode, 1969; Harding and Zinberg, 1977; Weil, 1972; Zinberg, 1984) as well as rave culture, particularly from cultural studies theorists (Reynolds, 1999; Thornton, 1995). What these latter studies share is a deliberate effort not to formulate any *a priori* assumptions with regard to the motives of drug users or the effects of drugs that they experienced, but instead involve systematic observations of the behaviour of drug users as actors in a shared social context.

While the extant literature on drug use in Singapore has prominently focused on various substantive areas that cover user profiling, drug recidivism, and other social control mechanisms to curb drug use (Hanam, 1973; Kua & Tsoi, 1986; Ong, 1989; Ong & Isralowitz, 1996; Osman, 1999; Salleh, et al., 2007; Wan & Au Yong, 1973; Yahya, 1991), the absence of empirical research on ATS use is surprising given the notoriety it has received of late as a ‘social problem’ in the Singaporean popular media, government-related reports and other scholarly work on ATS from other countries. This paper questions the nature of such a longstanding ‘problem’ and shows that these constructions neglect and marginalise the direct experiences and realities of young users, many of whom have transformed the original authoritative and homogeneous descriptions of the issue to possibly include multiple, negotiated meanings collated and produced from their own social worlds. Rather than an ‘immoral’ and hedonistic escape from reality as depicted by

² Numerous works assert that those with supportive families, who are intelligent and interested in school, and are obedient and ascetic abstainers from tobacco and alcohol, among other variables, have a lower proclivity to use drugs than those who are discontent with their families, not doing well in school, and evidencing socially unapproved personality patterns, such as rebelliousness (see, for example, Biederman, et al., 1986; Denno, 1988; Huesmann, et al., 1984; Lewis, et al., 1979, 1981; Robins, 1966).

discourses emanating from academic scholarship and many nation-states that seek to control such groups (Ahlgren & Norem-Hebreisen, 1979; Jalali et al., 1981), or the latest fad in a persistently changing postmodern world of meaningless consumption and superficial display (Adlaf & Smart, 1997), I argue and demonstrate that ATS use, particularly its close association with ‘raving’, are meaningful experiences for users. These rave-related ATS use and activities provide new possibilities as ‘alternative’ spaces for users to connect and bond with one another. As such, this paper pays close attention to the uses, meanings, and experiences of drug use as young drug users themselves report them. It focuses primarily on the use of ATS, particularly methylenedioxy-metamphetamine (MDMA or Ecstasy hereafter), in the context of Singapore as a case study, and demonstrates that the experiences of these young drug users question and problematise the dominant moral claims constructed and politicised by an authoritarian state discourse³. This argument for studying meanings and processes is not intended to preclude attention to other issues such as the demographic characteristics of drug users or grounding the issue in epidemiological or psychological perspectives, but to suggest that for research focused on gaining insights into ATS and rave social worlds (as well as attending to aspects of the characteristics and histories of the individuals involved), the study of these meanings and processes is central. More significantly, most scholarly work that has been conducted to date with regard to drug issues has also mainly focused on incarcerated, rehabilitated, or institutionalised drug users.

This paper is divided into three broad parts. The first section briefly discusses the methodological issues encountered in the study and the eventual selection of respondents. The second part takes as its substantive core the exploration of the ATS user life world with a detailed discussion of their activities in raves and the various attractions ascribed to such experiences. Close references to both interview material and field-notes are made to illustrate the complexity and diversity embedded in such ATS experiences. It then proceeds to the final part that explicates the three central themes of the ATS experience that emerged namely connectivity, which includes sex and sensuality, altered states of consciousness, and ‘resistance’

Methodology

This study was largely based upon primary data gathered from intensive fieldwork conducted over the course of twenty months that employed multiple qualitative methods and research

³ For instance, the historical and contemporary construction of drug use in Singapore, which has been politicised as a ‘social problem’, has been documented extensively elsewhere (see, for example, Abdullah, 2005b).

strategies that include participant observation and narrative interviews with several groups of ATS users. Given the nature of the research problem, this necessitated entry into the social worlds of synthetic drug-users, despite the illegality of the activities and the potential danger associated with such participant observation that makes access to these spaces difficult and inaccessible, especially so as some of these activities and behaviours were well hidden from public view and sustained in intimate, often secretive networks. These multi-sited spaces included private 'rave' settings, home parties, and discotheques in both local and regional settings (specifically, Thailand and Malaysia). Secondary data from various sources such as newspaper articles, archival materials, ministerial speeches, and annual reports from national drug organisations in Singapore such as the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB), the Singapore Anti-Narcotic Association (SANA) and the National Council against Drug Abuse (NCADA) were also elicited.

My initial selection of respondents was based on the assumption derived from available illicit drug literature (Friedman, et al., 1999; True and True, 1977) that social networks, once tapped, would lead me to a corps of other respondents. To gain entry into these social worlds, I frequented these places, making myself visible, answering questions, and chatting with persons there. Considering the sensitive nature of the research and the possible presence of a large and obvious police force devoted to narcotics enforcement, my presence at such settings was always at first very suspect. Therefore, in order to win legitimacy, I had to establish myself with a core group of users who could be convinced that I was not an enforcement officer and who would vouch for me as research proceeded⁴. Convinced of my intentions for research, these initial respondents provided me with the names and contacts of others in their networks to enable me to meet them, and subsequently conduct participant observation and interviews. Through repeated contact with key individuals whose personal networks were extensive, I was able to gain access to these informal relational groupings. My incorporation into these social networks hence enabled me to obtain in-depth data on the dynamics of drug-user social worlds in Singapore. As the nature of my sample is obviously biased, the aim in this study is hence not to use data obtained from my respondents to make statistical generalisations, but to give an ethnographic account of their social worlds and motivations, which is lacking in the current drug literature, at least in the context of Singapore and Southeast Asia. It is also important to note that I was prepared to talk to *any* synthetic drug user who was willing to share her/his experiences with me, considering how

⁴ For example, in subsequent encounters with users, I would drop the names of these core users. A typical pattern was that the user would be hesitant to talk first, the conversation would end, and I would not see the person for a length of time. In the meantime, s/he would talk to one of my references, and our next conversation would then be more open and productive.

difficult it was to procure respondents. As such, I did not deliberately select respondents based on a specific ethnic, class, gender, occupational background, or any socio-demographic variable, but rather on her/his experiences with ATS use⁵.

Drug Worlds and Stories of ATS Users

ATS use and its close association with rave subculture has been overlooked in Singapore, in spite of the fact that raves have received extensive attention in British cultural studies literature (McRobbie, 1994; Reynolds, 1999; Thorton, 1995). The nature of the rave party⁶ is that it is often an illegal event operated without overt publicity and communicated through information networks such as flyers, the internet, and more crucially, through intimate, selected networks of friends, and held in non-traditional venues such as rented flatted factories, derelict buildings, and fields (though there have also been legalised raves organised in various nightclubs and discotheques). The rave usually ‘starts to roll’ (i.e. reach its peak attendance and beginning performances from the main disc jockeys) after 11pm, though it may be later in illegal venues, and ends at 3 am, but again much later in illegal venues. This does not include the ‘after-parties’ that continue at other locations, sometimes at a smaller venue, though this normally takes place in private residences in Singapore and other illegal venues within and beyond Singapore.

The post-party venue was named [*name withheld*], and it started to open at about seven in the morning. Everybody was high at the venue, even after a night of raving ... The DJ came up to the microphone and announced “Good morning, class!” and asks if you had done your homework and revision yet. The crowd shouted a resounding “yes”, and dancing began again, though there were some who were in their stages of coming down, and thus they

⁵ Due to the complexities and sensitivities characterising ATS use, the descriptions provided will not allude to any specific locale or setting. While the fieldwork has covered many sites where ATS was used, particularly at rave settings, the descriptions here will be highly generalised, but will nevertheless provide sufficient background for the reader to understand and capture the multiple patterns underpinning ATS use and experiences. Such raves and private parties not only occur in the context of Singapore, but also increasingly occur around the Southeast Asian region, including Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, as well as island parties such as Ko Phangan and Ko Samui (both in Thailand). It must be noted that the details presented here not only background the context of this study, but as with all ethnographic data, it contains both descriptions and analytical segments that will be drawn later in the subsequent section.

⁶ Some observers of raves have compared them to Dionysian celebrations, which were high-spirited, uninhibited affairs at which following an offering of food at his shrine, the god’s worshippers would perform frenetic masked dances to the accompaniment of percussion instruments. See Walton (2002) for more information.

were just sitting on the couches while listening to the music. A few hours later at about 10 am, the DJ announced “Okay, class is over. Hope to see you all again next week.” (fieldnotes)

There are normally long, but discrete queues nonetheless, since most entrances in illegal settings are not conspicuously noticeable. For the most part, ATS users at a rave are young, ranging from 15 to 28 years old, though the legal age of entering most legalised venues in Singapore is between 18 to 23 years of age⁷.

The rave exists to enable individuals to participate in the collective process of elation brought about by a particular atmosphere that combines music, lights, and most importantly in the context of this study, ATS use. In many respects, most of the rave settings I explored are similar to large dance bars or discotheques, where there are dance floors filled with people and music booming with a heavy, intense beat that never stops during an event. The flashing lights typical of clubs are often complemented by other props, such as lines of television screens showing colourful computer generated forms.

Up-tempo techno music grew louder and louder as I reached an unmarked door. I went down several flights of steps, and saw a huge dance floor filled with hundreds of people. My respondent, who was once a bouncer there, told me, ‘Don’t be scared. No raids here. You’re safe.’ (fieldnotes)

The disc-jockey (DJ) usually manipulates two records that are played simultaneously, thus producing a particular music ‘mix’. Participants consume the music in diverse ways, depending on their respective desired mood. At many of the raves and private parties I conducted participant observation in, there were usually different ‘rooms’, or dance floors playing different types of music. The music typically comprises beats that are very fast, electronic, and played at an intense pace. The frenetic characteristic of the beat serves to suture the various sound textures and different recordings onto a single plane to produce an unrelenting but hypnotising surface. There are also slower, ‘ambient’ beats played, usually characterised by a meandering sound with few lyrics associated with relaxing (or ‘chilling out’, which is specifically created to produce a calm atmosphere after dancing).

The underground club played what Jared (a respondent) called ‘real cool music’. There were big DJs playing as well ... It was, in Jared’s words, ‘trippy’ and the music sounded as if it was unwavering. (fieldnotes)

⁷ While the legal age of drinking alcohol in Singapore is 18 years of age, the minimum age requirement for entry into clubs and discotheques are determined by the organisers and/or clubs themselves (i.e. which may be above 18 years).

Magda: 'A lot of people say it's just beats and stuff, but you see I really think it's our new classical *lah*. Dance music is our new classical, yeah so like there are a lot of layers to it, it depends on a very complex structure now, instead of just dance music that you just jump and dance to, yeah. I think it's very melodious and has a lot of meaning'.

There is a lot of movement in these settings. People are frantically dancing to the music, but unlike some smaller nightclubs, where people face one another and dance in social circles, participants at raves have a tendency to face the DJ, and are careful to give each person next to them their own space to dance in, though in some cases, this may be difficult due to the lack of space in the venues, particularly for settings in Singapore. In many respects, dancing is viewed as a sensual and aesthetically pleasurable activity.

People were perspiring and jumping up and down while the music was playing. There were many hugs on the dance floor, and exclamations of love hollered during the party. I was in the middle of the dance floor for nearly two hours and was nearly exhausted, but people around me continued to dance vigorously, bouncing and hopping to the incessant music, at times irritatingly and they really had so much bounties of energy ... (It) lasted for so many hours non-stop. I went back in the morning and returned at night, and they were still at it! Stanford and his friends continued to dance ... They told me a few days after the party that their bodies just didn't want to give up. (fieldnotes)

Charlotte: 'At a rave you can dance all you want or with someone else or you can dance with a group of friends. A lot of the people who go to raves love dancing and that is why we are there. But that is like an offshoot of the music. After you listen to the music for a little while, the dance becomes an expression of how you interpret and express the music'.

Of course, what is most important and pertinent in such settings is the association with ATS use, where there exists a very clear relationship and link between drug use, dance, and music consumption in such recreational settings. Such frenetic trance dancing (with, or without drugs) is hardly a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the popularisation of MDMA and other ATS as the all-purpose 'dance drug' in remarkably different contexts. Many respondents describe the joys of MDMA-fuelled dancing, and the importance of music in disparate settings such as discotheques and private gatherings:

Richard: 'I love to dance on it [Ecstasy]. It's absolutely superb for dancing. You get the whole stimulation in your body, every nerve ending is just going, just bouncing to the music'.

Miranda: 'I love raving and the music. So it's like a whole package because the thing with dance music is that it's about, it's about a total change in

mindset because all this while people have been listening to a lot of guitar-based music and then it comes to electronic-based music right. When you have a totally open mindset as to what is good music, what is music in itself, whether it is music, is it original music, so it's like a totally different mindset, and the whole idea of drugs right, like opening up your mind, it goes so well... and everybody is just reacting to the music, dancing and all, and when you're on E (Ecstasy) it becomes like a whole, full experience'.

Bunny: 'I can dance the whole night when I'm on E, and that's good (laughs) because as we get older we dance less, because we're not so fit right? Then you know, you want, you want to be able to, because half the fun of the music is just not listening to it, it's reacting and dancing to the music, and so on, and so, when you're dancing your body like, the way of dancing, you know like, it goes so well with the music, everything is like in harmony *lah*'.

These users also carefully planned ahead before coming to a rave or house party, and described how their planning coincided with the structure of certain music tracks played at such rave settings. In fact, many of the other sub-genres of rave music are engineered to produce and enhance feelings of community, ecstasy, and unity with the crowd.

Berger: 'First, we would pre-party at someone's house, normally Smith's. This would include getting dressed up as fun as we could, listening to music, smoking pot (marijuana). Then at about 9.30 or 10, we would then go. We usually already had our E and other substances but if we didn't we would find one of our dealers and get what we needed and then we would take our drugs and dance the night away. Usually we would judge how good the night was by how much 'rug we cut' (how much we danced). Then we would go to an after party and do more drugs. Depending on who we're partying with, we might go to their house and chill there until we came down'.

Trey: 'The whole excitement, because clubbing in legal places start, for example, last time if I go for parties at [*name withheld*], parties start as early as 10.30 pm. The DJ comes on the console at around twelve, but the excitement of partying and the whole consumption [of Ecstasy and other ATS] comes as early as the day before, Friday, when I start ordering their Ecstasy, when they start to "score"... So the excitement can happen the day before or sometimes even a week before, I've already ordered Ecstasy for their parties. And then on Friday, the excitement begins. And then on Saturday night, people start partying right, like you saw right? The excitement starts at 6, people start dressing up, go out for dinner and... at 8, I start collecting from their dealers and start popping the pill. By then, the effects of the pill would have set in and I would be upping ('high'), depending on the quality of the pill, but most of the time, it would be alright'.

Miranda: 'The weird thing about Ecstasy and dance music right, first dance music has many layers, and then there's always a climax, and during that

climax, your body will climax as well, so it's like unbeatable that feeling. So we plan beforehand'.

ATS 'trips' usually follow a pattern that includes (1) a 'coming on', or 'build-up' (where the beat gets faster and faster) followed by (2) a 'plateau' stage (where the beat remains consistently fast) – a structure that is apparently conducive to an optimal euphoric feeling (a 'rush') for those on MDMA, and to a lesser extent 'crystal meth' (both amphetamines), and lastly (3) a comedown/chill out stage. These stages coincide with the direct effects of the MDMA experience. These effects usually become apparent twenty to sixty minutes after oral ingestion of an average dose (i.e. 100-125 mg), unlike other major psychedelic substances. The sudden and intense onset of the high experienced by many active users interviewed and observed is commonly referred to as the 'rush' (or 'wave'). This phase was often described as 'euphoria', 'bliss', 'pure love', and 'heaven', although some respondents (particularly during initial use) experience a certain degree of trepidation, anxiety, stomach tightness, and/or mild nausea.

This discomfort is generally transitory, and enters into a more relaxed state. In many respects, novice users occasionally experience some apprehension during this initial onset, though anxiety levels typically decrease with subsequent use, allowing for increased enjoyment. The frequency and intensity of the initial phase are highly variable, with many respondents describing a much more gradual (and often delayed) ascent on at least some occasions. The most dramatic accounts of the rush typically emerge from respondents' first experiences. The intensity of these first effects frequently makes an enduring impression that is easily remembered years thereafter.

Miranda: 'Everything was like new to me, and then I was like dancing ... I was really high, really happy. It was really so good, I could remember it till now ... It's like everything is perfect *lah*, you are perfect, everything is perfect that's like during the actual high'.

Trey: 'The state of consciousness for the first 15 minutes I was expecting to be hit by a high. After about 30 minutes from popping, I started to feel a certain, a certain fullness in my body. My body seemed to expand or my heart seemed to like well up, and you feel this great, you feel this feeling called love. You have this immense feeling where you feel very touched, very, very hugged, very consoled, you feel very in place'.

Steve: 'First when I popped it in, nothing happens, it will hit between fifteen to twenty minutes, to half an hour to hit me. The moment it hits right, I'm like absolutely [in] euphoria. I'm just like absolutely happy, just absolutely, absolutely happy. Nothing, nothing can and will get me down. Nothing will get me in a state of despair. I'm absolutely just happy, and your body is, you see what it does basically is, how a person becomes, how a person ends up in this state of happiness, for example say you see your

favourite movie. What happens is that your brain releases this thing called serotonin okay, there's a gland called the serotonin inhibitor okay. What Ecstasy does, it goes straight into the serotonin inhibitor and it releases the serotonin inhibitors. Usually in normal, when you're in a sober state of consciousness, right, the serotonin glands will just release serotonin just bits by bits. But with Ecstasy right, it opens up the entire valve, man, all the serotonin comes out okay, so this sudden surge of euphoria, like you've never been so happy before in your entire life, and ah, you can't stop talking, okay, all your inhibitions are lost'.

Many respondents note the different varieties of MDMA available in the underground market, how certain batches of MDMA provide a more intense rush than others that had a smoother onset, and describes the differences they perceived between the batches received:

There were different types of pills, and at different costs. They had so many colours like pink, blue, red, orange and some were even embossed with logos of Rolex, Mitsubishi, and a dolphin – and told me that some were mixed with other kinds of drugs like LSD and Ketamine, and these normally slow you down. People normally wanted the “uppest” drug, she said. The drug that kept them high for a long time. I asked her whether there were cheats or adulterated pills, and she nodded. She told me of cases where her friend had a pill that was just flour and Panadol, and so it takes experience to know and score your goods. Prices, she said, varied, and it's normally higher if you don't get it from your regular dealer. The last time she bought a pill from her dealer was about \$25.' (fieldnotes)

Aidan: 'The type that you take is important. I've taken, let's see, five varieties of the E thing. Basically each gives you a different sensation. There's one called Red Sky, and okay it's supposed to make you just, you know pyjamas party, that kind of thing, that's just supposed to make you very slumber but at the same time very euphoric as well. So it's a sort of laid-back sort of thing. That was what happened to me. It was still sort of a peaceful kind of happiness feeling... And then there's also Chinese Character, that's the name I know it's weird, Yin and Yang, and Purple Sky ... You can be perched (state of happiness) for quite long'.

Stanford: 'If you get the capsule form, capsule MDMA, man, you've got the right stuff. Your body gets so soft and you just wanna relax the whole day, sometimes you really won't be able to dance. The expensive stuff makes you relax. The cheap stuff, you get all sorts of brands like your Dove, your Tasmanian Devil, Macs, all these labels. These stuff you start grinding very hard, your jaw starts gnawing and then I know the stuff isn't good. But with E, it's really a party thing, it's really social, and so I mix and match, take E with Speed and get real energetic, because I want to party, and really the music does sound really better'.

Steve: 'Every Ecstasy pill has an emblem on it, you've got like your Mercedes, you've got your Toyota, you've got your White Apple, you've

got your Snow White, you've got your TPs, you've got your TUs, Crocodile, you've got your Lacoste, all kinds of names, Triple 8s, you've got different colours, you've got Blue Sky, Yellow Sky and stuff like that. Speedy is the term to give to describe like you have to dance, you're very fidgety, you have to dance. Personally, I like the fidgety pills, because I like to dance, I love to dance'.

After the experiences of the initial rush, it levels off to a smooth 'plateau' phase. It is this stable period that is generally regarded as the most pleasant and valuable component of the MDMA experience. This can manifest itself as a peaceful calm and affinity with others that can meander into a profound stillness. For a few users (particularly novices), the transition to this more composed state of being came as a respite to the apprehension experienced during the initial rush.

Magda: 'I was a little overwhelmed by its intensity. I sat in a chair and gripped the arms. I felt like I was tripping rather hard. Then I had this warm, comfortable, loving, touchy-feely feeling. It was a very communal thing. Everybody felt real open toward each other'.

Jared: 'I basically experience a quick adrenalin of rush, of, "Oh shit, how high am I gonna get?" And then that would last for a bit and then usually by then everything becomes absolutely relaxed and "Oh boy!" It's an "Oh boy!" drug. It's like "Oh boy, here I am again!"'

This 'plateau' phase generally lasts approximately three hours, before the first signs of 'coming down' set in. Respondents greatly differed as to their frame of mind and direct experiences during this period. While some users would often counteract the comedown by ingesting a 'booster' (generally much smaller than the initial dose) in attempting to regain a similar 'altitude' or 'high', other users eschewed this option, typically employing a variety of ways to ease the comedown. These included ingestion of marijuana, or/and reliance on non-drug strategies such as a hot bath or massage. However, almost all respondents noted some after-effects (mostly sluggishness) during the day following the experience, and most problems with MDMA are associated with this period.

Samantha: 'Sometimes the comedown is horrible. ... You can't really function, because you are completely out of your happy hormones and you feel like shit. But the coming down can be very nice, especially with friends, let's say you go clubbing, then you can share your experiences, you know like that... But coming down can be very isolatory, suddenly you are isolated in your own bedroom, so it can be very scary'.

Miranda: 'During the actual decline of the high, that's when you start coming down. Some people actually feel very, very depressed during the coming down because they can't accept that the high is over. But for me I like that part because for example you go party, right, and then after you

feel, after you feel the high and then after that you slowly coming down and you are slowly oozing back into reality and everything like that right, to me it's a very, very strong feeling because I accept the fact that this is what you experience, and now I'm going back to the reality zone, and somehow you, you appreciate the sober state for what it is'.

Steve: 'The coming down will be harsh. Once you start to feel the coming down, you will start getting a state of depression, but once again, you have to be, you have to be conscious enough that you're not actually feeling depression. It's because you're not in a state of happiness, because you're brought to this sudden state of happiness, right, and now the drug is wearing off, you're going back to your normal state. This sudden surge that makes you feel depressed, but actually you're not depressed, you have not gone beneath your normal line (of happiness), you see, so that's why everyone says coming down is very harsh *lah*, but I'm okay about it. I admit it gets me in a bad mood sometimes. I quarrel with my girlfriend before'.

Discussion

Based on these experiences and stories, ATS use is a complex phenomenon that is meaningful to active users. The motivations and ideals that underlie ATS use and the rave scene support this argument. These can be grouped into three broad and usually interconnected categories, namely connectivity, including its association with sensuality and intercourse; 'altered' states of consciousness; and lastly, 'resistance'. These meaningful and calculated experiences provide alternative realms of possibilities for users which respond to the many of the dominant discourses which the state employs in its attempt to eliminate drug use in Singapore. While I attempt to present these themes in a systematic manner, it is not my intention to portray a homogeneous and static representation of ATS use and the rave experience. Rather, I contend that ATS use is characterised by the diverse ways of expression at different levels among different members, and within other contexts. While this study does recognise ATS use and rave culture as a generalised phenomenon, I am cognisant of the fact that what I observed and experienced in Singapore, and the meanings of ATS use, are varied among different members and different sites, and will undoubtedly shift over time.

Connectivity, Sensuality and Intercourse

One of the most often recounted and important features of the ATS experience, particularly MDMA, is that of an overwhelmingly interpersonal connection among members, variously described as 'unity' or plain 'love'. Users emphasise the feeling of togetherness or connectedness as the most salient and pertinent motivating factor to induce them to take ATS, and indicate that

its use, as well as the communal and socially unrestrictive atmosphere of rave settings and parties are necessary to foster this sense of togetherness. ATS, particularly MDMA in many cases, releases inhibitions, promotes feelings of happiness and euphoria, and is noted for breaking down social and cultural barriers (Reynolds, 1999). Significantly, almost all respondents mention and profit from this enhanced sense of closeness, belonging, and communication with other people.

Miranda: 'I tend to feel a lot more, more love, more empathy towards people. I love everybody, yeah. The drugs just enhances your communication, you know, it's just right *lah*'.

Almost all users regard MDMA as a 'people drug', a social lubricant to be shared with close friends or lovers, typically citing reduced inhibitions, and enhanced communication and closeness with others as primary interpersonal attributes of MDMA.

Stanford: 'It's a very social drug. It makes me, I don't know how to describe it, it makes you connect. You feel very good about yourself and others, you feel that you are more expressive and that you are the most beautiful, most talented dancer on the floor. I mean all your inhibitions are gone, left aside. And yeah it feels good and you can connect more easily with your friends, with the ones you love'.

Miranda: 'The thing about going into clubs right, because you meet people, and some more when you're on it, you're like exceptionally friendly and ...you can really talk to any single person in the world. You can just start up a conversation with anyone, so its kinda goes well with the club atmosphere, or at home, where everybody is like friendly, chatty, talking, you know. It's really a social thing, so it's a sharing experience between me and my friends because when you're on it (Ecstasy), you know, all your filters are removed, and as friends, it's very good, it's a tool, kind of, for you know, sometimes friends right you know everyday you meet during dinner, you don't talk much to them about really close talking unless you make the effort... So in certain groups of friends *lah*, for my group of friends, it's like when we do this, we somehow all our barriers are shed and that's when we really connect, that's where when everything comes out *lah*, like whatever problems or whether like I love you so much and everything, all these come out, which normally doesn't come out because we are restrained by our inhibitions, you see, even amongst friends, we have our inhibitions. You know, like with your friends, you don't say like "Eh, I really treasure you", you know'.

Carrie: 'When you're on it, between two people right, like I said, like all inhibitions, everything comes out *lah*, your emotions, and everything, everything will come out *lah*, and you feel in harmony with your loved one'.

While many initially approached MDMA as a recreational substance to be used during rave settings and parties that was akin to alcohol to some extent, they came to regard its 'bonding' effects as therapeutically valuable.

Miranda: 'The funny thing about our group, right, it's a very big group of friends, and what really brought us close right first was partying, but after that it was actually the moments that we share having the Ecstasy'.

This connection with candour and openness links MDMA very much with sensuality, and in effect, it has been frequently referred to as an aphrodisiac in popular discourses. Regardless of its reputation, most respondents describe MDMA as providing a sensual and sexual experience that enhances the pleasure of touching and physical closeness. These findings are in accord with those of earlier naturalistic studies conducted of MDMA users in other countries (Buffum & Moser, 1986; Weil, 1976; Zinberg, 1976). In many ways, respondent descriptions of MDMA's sensual effects resembled Zinberg's (1976:70) observations of MDA⁸ users: 'Sexual relationships were possible as the drug waned, but during the height of the high people described a greater interest in a general, diffuse sensualism than in specific sexuality...This sensualism showed itself in a wish to touch others or to feel the sand, grass, water, flowers or the like'. In explaining the rising sensuality associated with MDMA, most respondents also cite this augmented tactile reaction with lowered inhibitions. Some respondents similarly described how they would often think about intercourse, both with their partners or alone.

Aidan: 'This pill, Crocodile, it heightened my sexual, you know, my sexual instincts. You are supposed to be, you know, sexually aroused and all that, so it was real good sex with him'.

In general, however, most respondents felt that sexuality was secondary to the overall sensuality associated with MDMA use.

Carrie: 'It's definitely more sensual. I love to touch and be held, but I don't really feel as horny or a strong sexual urge to fuck. I mean sex was nice, but it's just not the main thing that comes to mind for me when I do it. I'm more of just wanting to hold someone, to touch, to cuddle, yeah basically to touch them'.

These sentiments of emotional connectivity and sensuality are in concordance with what is known globally within rave-related ATS circles as 'Peace-Love-Understanding-Respect' (or PLUR) based ideals. While such responses and comments as those articulated are commonplace

⁸ MDA (or 3,4-methylenedioxyphenylisopropylamine) is part of the same chemical family tree that MDMA belongs to.

in the study, and are the crux of the data underlying this section, PLUR-related beliefs and expressions are occasionally articulated through and on rave-flyers that are designed and distributed to selected, closely-knit groups of ATS users. Many respondents describe explicitly how these philosophies (i.e. PLUR and related ideas associated with sharing and breaking down barriers) are valuable and can be employed in their everyday lives. One of them explains how lessons derived from their direct and vicarious experiences of ATS can be applied:

Samantha: 'If there was a hippy commune suddenly back in Singapore, most probably I would be the one starting it, because I need to regress. I can't access [communicate with] people. We're moving too fast. At least here I get to express love, you know PLUR. And when I'm not at raves, I try do to that, you know, be more understanding, less inhibited, though it's always easier when you are at the rave. But I try'.

The PLUR perspective manifests itself meaningfully in variegated ways at rave settings. For instance, at no time did I feel physically threatened at a rave, though my initial entry in the field was admittedly nervous and discomfiting. Often people would smile and offer me what I thought was a pill, but I would always decline the offer. When people bumped into me accidentally while dancing, they would often apologise, smile and laugh. Other times, they were giving away and sharing other things, like drinks and food. In fact, at one party, the DJ kept shouting 'Peace, love and everything nice! There's no attitude with us here. We are good vibes'. In such settings, the experience and profound feelings of connectivity, communality, 'equality', and shared symbols closely resemble the experience of *communitas* that Turner described as characteristic of ritual events such as countercultural happenings (Turner, 1969; 1974; 1982). *Communitas*, to Turner (1974:44), referred to 'the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses'. He suggested, for instance, that when people from all levels of society were unable to locate the feeling of immersion or 'flow'⁹ and feeling of intense togetherness in their normal, de-ritualised, everyday events of life, such as their work or school, they would alternatively seek opportunities elsewhere to create this. In other words, this is 'viewed as release from work's necessities and something one chooses to do' (Turner, 1982:37), which provides an outlet to 'generate new symbolic forms' as well as to 'transcend social structural limits' (ibid.). Additionally, it gives people an enormous sense of empowerment, or what Turner (1982) calls 'endless power'. Thus, the link between rave-related ATS experiences

⁹ 'Flow' was termed by Csikszentmihalyi (1997) to refer to a holistic and unified state of untroubled creativity in the mind that is derived primarily from a mastery of a particular activity.

and *communitas* has recently been highlighted by a number of scholars (Hutson, 2000; Tramacchi, 2000). In particular, the data gathered in this study thus far appear to indicate that *communitas* as a conceptual tool can be mapped directly onto what users describe as the shared experiences of connectivity with one another.

It is important also to note that not all rave events and ATS ‘trips’ share the same level of connectedness nor can all of them be said to exhibit it at all. In fact, as Reynolds (1999) and others have documented in accounts elsewhere, many of the sub-genres of rave music appeal to a small number of users who are not keen on a connected rave experience¹⁰, though this study has not observed such users or events before. Furthermore, respondents differed when they described the levels and types of ‘bonding’ that were most significant to them. Responses ranged from seeking ‘oneness with the world’ to reaching reconnection with their important loved ones. In most cases, however, ‘bonding’ implied sharing intimacy and having good times with a loved one, or a group of friends in a variety of contexts.

‘Altered’ States of Consciousness

A second theme emerging from the data is the experience of ‘altered’ states of consciousness, which is fundamental to rave-related ATS ‘trips’. As many authors elsewhere have noted, rave and ATS subcultures share numerous similarities with the counterculture of the 1960s and 70s in the U.K. and U.S.A., not the least of which is its experimentation with illicit substances and altered states of consciousness (Fritz, 1999; Hutson, 1999; McCall, 2001; Reynolds, 1999; Silcott, 1999; Thomas, 2002). Users attend rave events to attain, among other things, extraordinary psychological states, especially through the use of ATS, repetitive dancing, and immersion in the crowd, electronic music and lighting patterns, or a combination of any number of these drivers. The descriptions of these ‘trips’ and encounters are mostly variegated, but most users describe their best experiences as ‘euphoric’, ‘enlightening’, ‘transcendent’, ‘pure bliss’, ‘it was like flying’, ‘heavenly’, and ‘religious’.

Steve: ‘The experience that is so completely different you would have to leave your state of sobriety *lah*, where you would see or feel things that are totally different *lah*. Being high, being in this state of consciousness is unbelievable bliss, I tell you. It’s one of the best experiences in my life!’

¹⁰ For example, genres of music such as ‘hardcore’ and ‘jungle’ not only attract users and participants interested in a particularly ‘aggressive’ experience, but the tracks and songs from these genres are structured by DJs and producers to elicit such types of experiences. These often employ mixes of harsh, industrial noises, screaming, and so forth (Reynolds, 1999).

Trey: 'It's really a very visual world. There's so much interesting and indescribable images, it's almost heavenly'.

Connected to and closely associated with altered states of consciousness is the concept of spirituality¹¹. As some respondents express in their personal accounts to me, ATS and the effects of altered states of consciousness provide an outlet to explore a meaningful, 'spiritual' path.

Miranda: 'When I began taking E, I was on top of the world, really. I insisted that everyone I knew who hadn't experienced it were missing a huge deal and had to do it in order to find true inner peace. Really it was a truly, truly, purely spiritual release for me'.

Steve: 'The feeling is almost spiritual. When the effect kicks in, especially when E is mixed with Acid, you are able to see anything you want to see. And everything around me, the feeling is so magical, you would feel this intense closeness, as if you are one with everything, everything morphing in colours... I discovered the joy of the dance, pouring it all out in a frenzy that frequently bordered on the religious.

Fritz (1999), Reynolds (1999), and Silcott (1997), amongst others, have also contended that for many participants, rave-related ATS use is a religious or spiritual experience. While this is not present in Singapore apart from some close resemblances with Christian charismatic groups, Reynolds (1999:242) notes that the spiritual potential of ATS and rave experiences have been identified and recognised by some Christian organisations in other countries¹².

More crucially, the central role of the DJ within the ATS/rave experience and setting is akin to a type of 'shaman' in his¹³ capacity as the leader of the congregation and master of the ceremony, which also suggests the analogy to religious ritual¹⁴. Like shamans, DJs, who may or

¹¹ While the concept of spirituality has various definitions, Emmons and his colleagues argue that the most consistent definition of spirituality used by scholars encompasses 'a search for meaning, for unity, for connectedness, for transcendence, for the highest of human potential' (1998:401).

¹² Reynolds gives the example of the Billy Graham's Youth for Christ in Britain (1999:242). These groups have tapped into the power of embodied experiences that take place within rave-related ATS culture.

¹³ Most DJs globally (and at least all in my studies) are male.

¹⁴ Shamans are able to enter and connect with other invisible worlds and ecstatic states of consciousness through trance under controlled conditions (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1973; Vitebsky, 1995). Thus within a shamanic culture, there is more to 'reality', especially to its conscious aspect, than that which meets the ordinary senses (Vitebsky, 1995). The shaman often 'provides the language to express otherwise inexpressible psychic states, which can never be described in literal terms, and it may be that shamans are particularly good...at organising ambiguous impressions into coherent images' (Vitebsky, 1995:78). The experiences of the spiritual realm and the concomitant inducement of altered states of consciousness in shamanism are closely

may not ingest ATS drugs while performing, have the ability to transport the crowd to an alternative realm of consciousness through repetitive percussive music and dance. Further, his position on a raised platform suggests symbolically an altar of worship, where his followers below revere to and connect with him, while they dance, prostrate, and shout to the music he mixes. In my research with ATS users at rave settings, many of the individuals characterise the DJ at any rave as leading the crowd on a ‘spiritual trip’, and emphasise his importance in the setting.

There were crowds of young people on the dance floor, frenetically dancing and moving to the beat of the music. From the top, it looked as if they were worshipping the DJ on the raised platform while dancing, jumping, and shaking their heads to the music, and moving their arms and hands in the air or in different directions as if they were possessed or in a state of ecstasy. Some were hugging each other. Behind the DJ there were psychedelic lights flashing that accompanied the loud music he played. (fieldnotes)

Miranda: ‘Everybody was facing the DJ, showing appreciation to the DJ, screaming and dancing. It’s like a whole experience. You know you leave your inhibitions, you know the DJ will bring you into a whole new realm of consciousness, of, of a new spiritual journey... So, the DJ is so, so, so important. If he can make music that brings my body to express new heights, new feelings, to a peak, boy, I’ll respect him, *lah*. But sometimes you get a real fucked up DJ, the kind that plays the songs for the kiddy punks, you know the kind that they like, techno *Ah-Lian*¹⁵ kind, that one, sorry, the DJ can’t make it *lor*’.

Steve: ‘I mean if the DJ sucks right, I would leave, like that *leh*, even though I’m in such a good mood and when everybody’s in such a good mood, but if the DJ sucks and can’t bring me to a peak, I would actually like say “Okay guys, let’s just go back home”, and we’ll leave... So, he’s almost like, like, like a leader, like a priest, like your link to the next world... We let him guide us with his music, with his beats, with his energy’.

linked to music and trance dancing. Though not practised in some shamanic cultures, the ingestion of drugs, particularly hallucinogens that are derived from psychotropic plants such as the peyote cactus, and fly agaric, are important to many, especially those in South America and aboriginal Siberia (Harner, 1973; Vitebsky, 1995). As Vitebsky (1995:85) puts it: ‘Drug taking [among shamanic communities] is not part of an alienated rejection of society...but a means to a fuller integration of the individuals with others’. In fact, non-shamans often take a drug along with a shaman such as in the case of curing sessions to achieve similar states of consciousness together.

¹⁵ This refers usually to subcultural groups of Chinese youth in Singapore who dress and behave in a particular manner, with the propensity to be overtly noisy and loud in disposition and mannerisms. They are crassly termed as ‘Ah-Bengs’ (for the men in the group), and ‘Ah-Lian’ (for the women in the group).

Thus, the DJ is a central figure within the rave setting who regulates not only the mood of his 'congregation', but also the experiences that users go through via his selection and manipulation of music he plays or mixes.

'Resistance'

Extensive studies that examine the concept of resistance have addressed the organised nature of collective action against domination and exploitation in marginalised social groups that include students, peasants, women, and gays and lesbians (Foucault, 1978; Moore, 1950; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Lamphere & Zavella, 1997; Ong, 1987; Scott, 1976; Taylor, 1989; Tilly, 1978, 1984), recruitment and participation in these social movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Opp & Gern, 1993), and the performance of such collective movements (Selznick, 1952; van Til, 2000). These works redress the balance of history that has, for the most part, been articulated by the 'victors'.

In many ways, the ATS and rave experiences can also be regarded and re-conceptualised as an alternative method of 'resistance' for its users. These provide the possibility for users to reconstruct the meanings of drug use in a different way than that dictated by dominant state discourses. Within this 'alternative' space, there exists a gradual reversal of the perceived dominant societal norms of oppression and poor communication. The ATS rave party is, to some extent, a 'micro-society' where ATS and rave values (such as connectedness and acceptance) can be enacted through dance, music, and the ingestion of ATS. Thus, in effect, ATS and rave culture are about reconfiguring certain aspects of society in non-offensive, covert but real ways. This extends further than merely coping with and escaping from the multiple pressures of everyday living in the increasingly pressurising late 1990s and early 2000s. In its ideal form, then, ATS and its association with rave is in some ways a 'quiet' social movement, a de-politicised form of resistance than is able to gradually modify everyday practices, as McRobbie (1993, 1994) and Pini (1997) have argued separately in the context of Britain.

From the data collected, there is evidence to show that some ATS users, especially those in rave settings, do symbolically and purposefully resist mainstream and dominant value systems and moralities. The support of the PLUR philosophy and the significance of 'breaking down communication barriers' and connectedness are considered as crucial 'corrections' to the everyday violence and alienation that (in their view) represent the dominant discourses. These discourses do not congeal to their everyday life experiences in Singapore:

Carrie: 'When I take Ecstasy I get a certain kind of rush, it's like a feeling of liberation like you never felt before, and totally relaxed... I mean

Ecstasy was a release *lah*, so I guess it's good when you live in a society like Singapore where there's not much outlet for the senses to, you know, really get in touch. It's really a form of deliberate expression for me... It liberates you from the strains of society. That's why I do it. It gives you room to express yourself openly and not feel restricted. That's the way it's supposed to be'.

These findings also illustrate that 'spectacular' youth subcultures are not *necessarily* meant for overt public display, even though the acts may be active forms of 'resistance'. In other words, while certain activities such as drug-induced dancing were embraced and practised, they were not necessarily meant to attract wide attention from those outside the ATS scene, nor were they meant to appal or shock. This is an appendage to conventional conceptualisations of 'spectacular' subcultures in the studies of social deviance, such as punks and skinheads. Moreover, the findings that users themselves give resistive meanings to their activities are useful as an empirical reiteration of what are often purely theoretical readings of subcultures. This is not to say that 'resistance' must be verbally articulated for it to be 'real' and authenticated. In fact, such resistance does occur in everyday settings of other marginalised communities, as other theorists (Scott, 1976) and I have indicated elsewhere (Abdullah, 2005a). However, the research findings that include this type of 'first-hand' evidence supporting the contention that such subcultural activities are intentionally oppositional are less susceptible to the common criticism that social theorists of subcultural studies and everyday resistance 'seem to have discovered resistance virtually everywhere' (Gruneau, 1988:25), or that they tend to theorise resistance without any insight into the actual meanings that members of such groups themselves assign to their activities (Tanner, 1996), or that such studies of 'resistance' are overly romanticised, overstating the 'resistive' potential of the group itself.

However, to be sure, not all users give subversive meanings to activities associated with ATS at any given time, and often rave-related ATS users consider their activities in more or less resistant ways. Underlying these observations, more crucially, is the contention that these users are not necessarily reacting with the sense of resentment and frustration that tends to characterise the doctrines and activities of 'spectacular' working class subcultures. The findings in this study show that the activities associated with ATS and raves are oftentimes abstract and open to multiple interpretations from different social actors. Moreover, and without writing off the importance of addressing the differences in rave-related ATS 'resistance' or the 'empowerment' that can be accrued from ATS use and raving, it is crucial to be sensitised to the multitude of ways that a social 'movement' can be interpreted. Furthermore, underlying ATS and rave-related practises that are supportive of this doctrine are tensions and contradictions that undermine any

‘real’ subtle resistances that might take place beyond those existing in some pockets of the ATS and rave scenes.

Carrie: ‘At some point it became rather tiring, you know the whole thing... it got very superficial. Yeah it’s like I mean everybody just got there to have fun ... and yeah, it just got very superficial, it’s not real anymore. I mean you feel this sense of love, you are like, you’re as though your mind is like opened up and you are devoid of any discriminations you know...but I guess anything taken to the extreme, after a while, it becomes superficial, it becomes forced. That’s already superficial because it’s taken to the extreme. It’s like people who don’t even know each other, when they are on Ecstasy they look like they are the best of friends. I don’t think that’s real, that’s superficial’.

Brady: ‘When you go to some places right, and you don’t know anybody, and everybody is just, basically everybody has their own selfish concerns *lah*, they all just want to get high, they all want to enjoy the music, but they don’t really care much about communicating with people, or having that spark of human touch, you know, between one person and another’.

In its present form, especially in a generally authoritarian socio-political context such as that of Singapore, it is implausible that these activities would threaten structures that maintain mainstream dominant values and norms. In fact, aspects of rave, for instance, have been effectively diluted through ‘strategies of neutralisation’ (Baron 1989; Hebdige, 1979) that included its incorporation into mainstream popular club culture. Thus, PLUR-related ‘resistance’ can make not much difference to some users (i.e. ‘resistance’ actually perpetuates the consumer cultural agenda, while providing only a temporary sense of ‘empowerment’ for rave-related ATS users). Further, there are instances where users ironically (but selectively) support the state’s harsh stand on drug use.

Carrie: ‘I’m actually quite happy with the way things are done now by the state. I mean as a citizen I feel safer, but I mean, I think yeah they should step up, you know, because some people can’t handle it for some drugs like heroin, but for others like E, and weed (marijuana) they should just legalise it’.

Stanford: ‘It’s basically for deterring, it’s a bit harsh, but it’s okay if you ask me. I guess it’s to protect the overall population, but I’m still doing my drugs. They should just allow it to not go into excesses’.

Charlotte: ‘The only reason why I would agree with the government, stringent government policies on drug use right is precisely because I know of some people out there that I can’t trust them to know how to deal with the drug if left on their own devices and left everything to the dealer... It’s a paradox *lor*. I worry about these people, so on the one side you don’t want to abuse human rights, but on the other side, the

government wants to worry about that part of the population that would really destroy their lives. But given the lesser for both evils, I would say seriously don't infringe on human rights. Most people in Singapore are aware, most drug users know what they do. They need more open information'.

In fact, for some other users interviewed, ATS and raves were associated with seeking pleasurable and sensual experiences. For these respondents, raves were attended largely because they acted as alternative spaces for ATS use and sites where they could dance freely, enjoy their music and connect with friends. These users thus did not interpret their acts as subtly, symbolically, or overtly resistant – instead focusing on how rave was, in essence, about having a 'good time'.

Brady: 'I simply just like to come to a rave, have my E or any other drug, and party. It's just a cool place for me to simply have fun, and enjoy myself with my friends, and enjoy the mood of the party, to enjoy the music, and enjoy the DJ'.

These findings then problematise and demonstrate that empowerment and pleasure (among the other types of benefits that are read from ATS and its association with raves) can be conceptually distinct from 'resistance' or subversion, as some cultural theorists put forward.

Despite this, however, it has also been shown from the current findings that ATS and raves are empowering (if not resistant) for some youths, and not an exclusively escapist and hedonistic space; while for other respondents, there appeared to be neither a view towards intentional resistance, nor passivity. The pertinent argument this study therefore puts forward is that ATS use and its association with raves are meaningful in different ways, and its potential for resistance and the plausibility for alternative meanings attached to this are also interpreted in diverse and variegated ways, even within a particular social context. In other words, these two positions, while distinct in their assumptions, articulate how interpretations of ATS use and raves do not necessitate a vision of youth behaviour as an either/or dichotomy of resistance or passivity, but instead a continuum of youth behaviour.

More significantly, the finding that users paradoxically subscribe to both mainstream and deviant discourses and values indicate the possibilities of interface and negotiation between the two sets of moralities and normative systems. In other words, some users in fact subscribe to both mainstream (i.e. dominant, law-abiding), and 'deviant'/'criminal' (i.e. marginalised) normative systems (cf. Sykes and Matza, 1957).

Steve: 'My two close friends, one of them, he's an associate lawyer at [name withheld]. We've just had Ice and some Ecstasy over the weekend. But when he goes to work, he's like a normal person. Sunday he was coming out with Ice and E, Monday, he had a meeting with his clients, so he's like yeah'.

Thus, in the theoretical tradition of Sykes and Matza (1957), these active users are not necessarily totally contemptuous of the discourses of the state, but 'negotiate resistance' within certain parameters that they recognise as meaningful and pertinent to them. In other words, the activities in the ATS worlds observed and narrated by users demonstrate an ambiguity in the nature of the boundaries between fixed conceptions of 'right' and 'wrong', and 'moral' and 'immoral'. They do not merely subsume themselves conveniently into such categories and thus these spaces and activities become potentially important events marking the impossibility of establishing fixed frames of reference in terms of 'normality' and 'deviance'.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has introduced the drug worlds and settings of ATS users, particularly in rave encounters. More crucially, it has attempted to empirically tap into and draw directly from the experiences and stories from users themselves, which demonstrated that the use of ATS is a meaningful and enriching experience for young users. The themes of connectivity, altered states of consciousness and 'resistance' cumulatively combine to advance this contention further. Not only do they respond to the discourses of many states which typify drug use as meaningless, immoral, and wrong, they rationalise ATS use as an alternative method of negotiating the circumstances and structures users are located in. In fact to many users, such experiences embody spiritual, moral, and even resistive qualities. This paper has also illustrated that the meanings of 'resistance' with regards to ATS use and its association with rave settings can be read in a multiplicity of ways. The complexity embedded in these experiences and stories as narrated by young users themselves show that ATS use and raves cannot easily and conveniently be subjugated by the discourses put forward by the state and by other forms of scholarship that have identified general drug use, as well as raves, in a particular moralising manner. As such, this paper also serves to show that 'resistance' can be interpreted and re-conceptualised in a diversity of meaningful ways, which are embedded in a complex process of negotiation between imposed structural constraints and their potential as active, thinking human agents.

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