

## **Submission to Tijdschrift over Cultuur & Criminaliteit**

### **Title**

Moving beyond the other: A critique of the reductionist drugs discourse.

### **Key words**

Drug use, drug users, drug policy, drug reform, media, discourse, the other.

### **Summary**

This paper uses the UK as a vehicle through which to argue that a dominant reductionist drugs discourse exists which simplifies understandings of drug use and drug users leading to socio-cultural misrepresentations of harm, risk and dangerousness. It contends that at the centre of this discourse lies the process of othering - the identification of specific substances and substance users as a threat to UK society. Interestingly, within the wider context of global drug policy reform this othering process appears to be expanding to target a wider variety of factors and actors - those policies, research findings and individuals which contest normative notions, resulting in the marginalisation of 'alternative voices' which question the entrenched assumptions associated with drug prohibition. The paper concludes that there is a need for collective action by critical scholars to move beyond the other, calling for academics to be innovative in their research agendas, creative in their dissemination of knowledge and resolute despite the threat of being othered themselves.

### **Author**

Stuart Taylor, Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Address: School of Law, Liverpool John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool, L3 5UZ, UK.

Email: s.taylor2@ljmu.ac.uk

Phone: + 44 151 231 3259

Mobile: +44 773 639 0009

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## Introduction

A significant body of academic work now exists which identifies the inconsistencies, flaws and dearth of evidence underlying contemporary drug laws (Boland, 2008; Buchanan, 2015). It is argued that policies of drug prohibition are only legitimised through tapered conceptualisations of drug use (Taylor, 2011), erroneous calculations of drug related harm (Nutt et al., 2010) and selective interpretations of complex relationships (Stevens, 2007). Despite this, drug prohibition endures. Additionally, a number of researchers have developed a richer understanding of the socio-cultural role of substance use arguing that contrary to dominant representations which frame drug use as intrinsically related to addiction, danger and negative outcomes (Taylor, 2008), the majority of drug use is controlled, recreational and associated with pleasure (Aldridge et al., 2011). Regardless of this, drug use and drug users continue to be framed as problematic, destructive and associated with a variety of social ills (UKDPC, 2010).

This paper considers these phenomena and attempts to explain why, despite the development of knowledge which questions the fundamental validity of current drug laws and intrinsically critiques the entrenched perceptions through which these are justified, the status quo is maintained (Brownstein, 2013). It argues that a key reason for the seeming inability of such knowledge to penetrate mainstream thinking is the existence of a dominant reductionist drugs discourse which actively stifles the dissemination of knowledge, removes nuance from the mainstream and through its narrow misrepresentative lens provides a fictitious footing through which drug prohibition is legitimised (Taylor et al., 2016).

At the centre of this discourse is the process of 'othering'; the identification and marginalisation of particular substances and substance users who are posited as dangerous and a risk to normative society (Ayres and Jewkes, 2012). This process has its origins in the moral entrepreneurship of drug scares which have historically legitimised the evolution of ever more punitive drug policies through constructions of 'the other' (Reinarman, 1994). Resultantly, the emergent system of drug prohibition has been shaped through conceptualisations of acceptable (safe) and unacceptable (dangerous) substance use assembled around stereotypical notions of race, class, age and gender (Pryce, 2012). As Saper (1974: 190) notes, the evolution of drug policy is grounded in a history of 'myth, fantasy, distorted half truth, and outright lies' with the process of othering so ingrained into socio-cultural representations that 'people ignore the truth for the lie'.

Interestingly, this othering process has recently become more complex. Whilst historically the gaze of othering has centred on individual substances and types of substance users, its remit has expanded to engulf a wider variety of actors – those who dare to challenge the entrenched assumptions of the reductionist discourse (Silverman, 2012). It appears that purveyors of 'alternative voices' are themselves framed as a threat, actively limiting the development, scope and distribution of knowledge via the suppression of plural discourses (Nutt, 2012). This process means that anyone who publicly questions the status quo becomes the dangerous other whilst those voices which reinforce the existing themes of the reductionist discourse are accommodated and amplified (Nutt, 2015). This results in two outcomes; firstly, it reinforces the normative themes of harm, risk and negativity that dominate drugs discourse whilst the conflicting notions of drug related pleasure and positivity are side-lined (Holt and Treloar, 2008). Secondly, it perpetuates a research culture which rewards the exploration and re-emphasis of normative notions whilst devaluing studies which seek to develop more holistic research agendas (Moore, 2008).

Critics may point to the raft of drug policy reforms currently emerging across the globe to argue that in fact the tide is changing - that alternative voices are actually being heard and indeed have

provided a momentum for progressive drug policy change. As Taylor et al., (2016) contend, however, such reforms essentially represent little more than the 'metamorphosis of prohibition': for whilst on the surface they may appear to be indicators of progressive policy reform motivated by mounting pressure applied by reformists, they are actually underpinned by prohibitionist principles which actively resist extant empirical evidence. Taylor et al. (2016) cite the example of cannabis legalisation arguing that recent international reforms have not been driven by any scientific evaluation of drug related harms – consequently whilst cannabis users now enjoy a position of legal privilege in certain jurisdictions, users of other less harmful substances such as MDMA or LSD (Nutt et al., 2010) continue to face prosecution for possession or supply. Resultantly, these reforms reconfigure rather than challenge normative constructions of the other.

Through consideration of these issues this paper concludes that a concerted effort is required from critical scholars to further progress our understanding of the place and role of drugs in contemporary society whilst simultaneously exploring innovative mediums through which such information can be disseminated (Brownstein, 2013). Unless we break the shackles of the reductionist discourse and move beyond the other, the inconsistencies, contradictions and harmful implications of entrenched conceptualisations of drugs will continue unabated, despite new knowledge (and 'new' drug policies) coming to the fore. The paper determines that there is a need for collective action by critical scholars to contest these damaging processes, calling for academics to be innovative in their research agendas and brave in 'going public' despite the risk of being othered themselves.

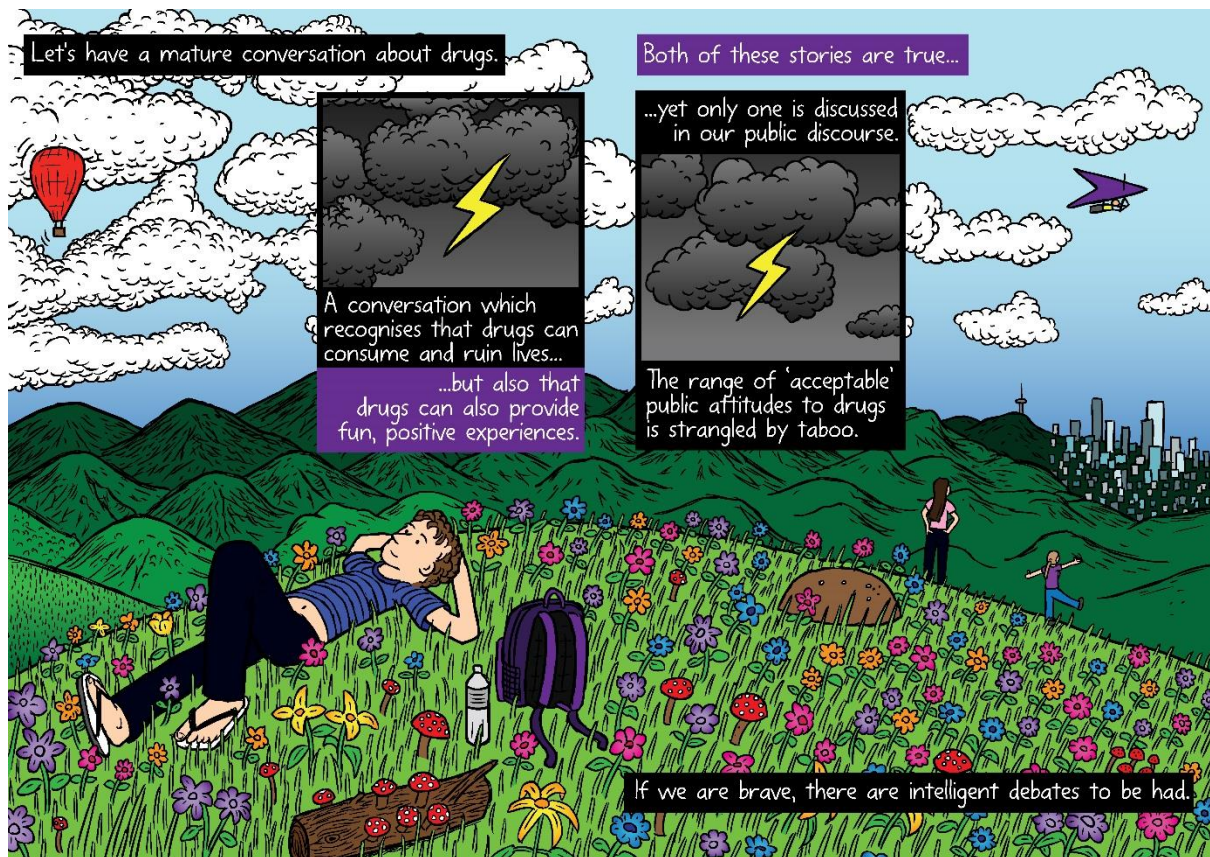
### **The reductionist drugs discourse and othering**

The roots of both critical and cultural criminology were perhaps sewn in academic observations around the socio-political framing of drug use and the implications for those experiencing stereotyping, marginalisation and enhanced attention from law enforcement agencies (Becker, 1963; Young, 1971). Such studies emphasised the need to advance our understanding of the socio-cultural place of drug use whilst simultaneously warning of the pitfalls of developing ill-considered policy responses fuelled by anxiety, myth and fallacy. The themes of these works have influenced generations of scholars, leading to an increasingly robust narrative of the socio-cultural place of drug use and drug users (Aldridge et al., 2011; Askew, 2013; Williams, 2013) and critiques of the socio-political construction of drug use (Ayres and Jewkes, 2012; Alexandrescu, 2014) and the spurious nature of drug policy (Boland, 2008; Silverman, 2012).

Despite this mass of literature and regardless of such phenomena forming the foundations of critical commentaries for over half a century, the processes identified by Young and Becker continue to flourish (Taylor, 2008). The expansion of academic knowledge within this sphere has struggled to meaningfully penetrate mainstream public discourse, policy making and practice, resulting in the continuation of the drug status quo - the key reason being that a reductionist drugs discourse, grounded in media misrepresentation and political rhetoric prevails (Smith, 2015). This discourse stifles evidenced based discussion focussing instead on a narrow array of issues with a predominant focus on risk, danger and negativity (Sturgeon-Adams, 2013).

A defining characteristic of the reductionist discourse is 'othering' – the framing of substance users as dangerous and problematic. Through this process a certain subsection of drug users are presented as generically representing all drug users. Consequently, our gaze is drawn upon a group framed as fundamentally different and posing a threat to 'us'; a group we conveniently hold responsible for a variety of social ills and whom therefore provide apparent evidence that drugs are bad/dangerous and those that take drugs are themselves bad/dangerous. The preoccupation with

these 'others' removes nuance from the mainstream, ensuring that understandings of drug use and users are skewed. As Stuart McMillan (2012) identifies in his illustration below, this has resulted in entrenched assumption cloaking holistic awareness.



(Image used with permission of Stuart McMillan, <http://warondrugscomic.com/>)

A number of commentators have taken up McMillan's challenge, identifying the need to reconceptualise our understanding of drug use through the consideration of elements such as pleasure (Moore, 2008), positivity (Hunt et al., 2010), and functionality (Boys et al., 2001). Interestingly, however, such 'alternative voices' remain largely on the periphery of public discourse. One reason for this is the inability of academics to transfer 'new' drug knowledge into the public realm (Brownstein, 2013). Another reason is the counter-reaction to such voices, with the process of othering expanding from its nucleus to encompass a wider spectrum of actors. Such is the power and dominance of the hegemonic drugs discourse (Smith, 2015) that those who question normative notions – through differential research findings or philosophical enlightenment – are themselves 'othered'. The purveyors of alternative knowledge are at best ignored or mistrusted, at worst they are framed as risk enhancing idealists whose irresponsible words glamourize the substances that are posited as leading to pain and misery.

Admittedly, a certain degree of academic knowledge has influenced 'advancements' in drug policy, for example in drug law reform e.g. decriminalisation, legalisation; and service delivery e.g. treatment provision, harm reduction techniques. Such developments, however, have been complicit in the perpetuation of discriminatory drug policies which continue to adhere to normative notions and constructions of the other. If these alternative voices have been heard, they have been used to justify the continuation of processes which underpin prohibitionist drug policy. As Taylor et al. (2016) argue, the decision to legalise cannabis in certain US states is not driven by a new body of

empirical evidence around harm or the scientific properties of substances being presented by purveyors of alternative voices, instead it is motivated by the popularity and profitability of cannabis and is indicative of the historical process of drug policy being aligned with the vested economic interests of Western society (Chambliss, 1977; Pryce, 2012). Furthermore, whilst there has been an expansion in treatment and harm reduction services within the UK, this has been motivated by a need to control and manage the risk of the problematic drug using other rather than being grounded in evidence which identifies the importance of addressing the needs of all substance users (Taylor, 2011).

Where knowledge fits the parameters of the normative discourse it is utilised to support the notion that drugs policy is evidence based, where it does not, it is disregarded. In England and Wales this is highlighted by the work of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs<sup>i</sup> (ACMD). In the last decade their scientific assessments of cannabis, MDMA and khat led to recommendations that these substances should remain in their current classification band, be downgraded or remain legal respectively (ACMD 2008; 2009; 2013a): all of which were ignored by government. Contrastingly, the ACMD's review of ketamine (ACMD, 2013b) led to a recommendation that the drug should be upgraded (enabling a more punitive response to its use and supply) and therefore fitted the UK government's principle of only ratcheting drugs *up* the UK classification system (Stevens and Measham, 2013): this resulted in legislative change.

In the broader sense, this disregard of research which fails to fit normative notions is of great importance given the wealth of alternative knowledge that now exists around drug use which challenges the entrenched assumptions of the reductionist discourse. Through the narrowness of this gaze we fail to identify and acknowledge the 'reality' of illegal drug use; that drugs are used by all kinds of people (Aldridge, 2008); that the majority of drug use is recreational (Aldridge et al., 2011), pleasurable (Duff, 2008) and non-problematic (Cruz, 2015); that the majority of use does not lead to drug-related crime (MacDonald et al., 2007), health-related harm (Whiteacre and Pepinsky, 2002) or require treatment (Siliquini, 2005); and that the majority of users continue to socially function alongside their use (Cruz, 2015). Such statements, viewed through the lens of the reductionist discourse, are construed as provocative alien concepts - behaviours more associated with the normative than the other. Ironically there exists a compelling evidence base supporting such statements, despite a dearth of funding opportunities for such studies (Moore, 2008). Regardless, such notions remain on the periphery whilst entrenched normative conceptions continue to be ingrained in public, media and political conscience due to the overriding power of the reductionist discourse and the construction of the other.

### **Constructing the other**

Whilst some writers have identified the difficulty of attempting to generalise patterns in drugs discourse (Giulianotti, 1997; Hughes et al., 2011), particularly in the contemporary multi-mediated environment (Forsyth, 2012), a number of academics have highlighted themes in how political and media discourses 'do drugs'. It has been argued that governmental discourse around drug consumption is 'characterised by compulsion, pain and pathology' (O'Malley and Valverde, 2004: 26) whilst the mainstream media compound this ideology with negative stereotypical representations of drug users (UKDPC, 2010). Indeed, a consistent theme in political rhetoric (Taylor, 2011), media reporting (Ayres and Jewkes, 2012) and drugs education (McInnes and Barrett, 2007) is the omnipresent threat of danger and the framing of drug use as an outsider activity, undertaken by a threatening group of drug using others.

This othering process has two key elements; Firstly, it frames certain substances as 'drugs' whilst other substances avoid this label, resulting in a bifurcation between licit and illicit substances (Buchanan, 2015). This dichotomy embeds the socio-cultural acceptance of certain substances whilst imbuing others (and their users) with harmful traits which require strict legal control. This othering process is evident in responses to the recent 'emergence' of Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) in the UK with both media and political discourses responding to this 'drug scare' (Forsyth, 2012) by presuming that all of these substances are harmful, without supporting evidence. The Psychoactive Substances Bill which is in the process of becoming legislation in the UK mirrors this by proposing a blanket ban on the sale of all NPS - a generic response to the othering of specific NPS. Examples include mephedrone (Alexandrescu, 2014) and more recently nitrous oxide (or laughing gas) which has been consistently referred to as 'hippy crack' throughout the UK media (see Linning, 2015; Parfitt, 2015). There is no obvious rationale to this label; it is instead a media construct which associates nitrous oxide with an already prohibited substance whilst aligning its use to a historical subculture of drug using others. Here the drug is othered as a substance which represents a risk to normative society.

Secondly, the othering process frames illegal drug users as fundamentally different to the normative population, consequently using *them* as evidence for the continuation of drug prohibition due to their dangerous nature. The best 'guesstimates' indicate that of the UK working age (16-59 year old) population, 11.2 million (35.6%) have used an illegal drug in their lifetime, 2.7 million (8.8%) have used a drug in the last year, and 985,000 (3.1%) are frequent users<sup>ii</sup> (Home Office, 2014a). Given these statistics it would appear that drug use, whilst remaining a minority activity, is a pursuit undertaken by a considerable body of the normative population. Contrastingly, however, the lens of the reductionist discourse ignores the wider body of users and instead focuses upon those deemed to be 'problematic' whom apparently number just under 300,000 (Hay et al., 2013). This group have common social demographics and are those whose drug use is most associated with addiction, unemployment and crime (Taylor, 2008). The apparent threat posed by these risk-bearing outsiders has promoted a similar response to that outlined above in relation to NPS: these users are seen as a universal representation of all drug users. As a consequence drug prohibition is generically legitimised due to the clear threat posed by 'drug users' whilst drug policy focusses almost exclusively on this group, cementing drugs as a criminal justice issue and justifying coercive treatment programmes to address the problematic nature of these others. By focussing on this minority of 'problematic' users we concentrate on a group of seemingly desperate individuals who take no pleasure from their 'addiction'. They are, in essence, slaves to their drug use. They provide clear evidence for the notion that 'drugs are bad'.

The result of this preoccupation with problematic users is that we actively ignore the reality of drug use. Consequently a normative and narrow drug discourse develops which categorises anything outside of its parameters as alien concepts. As such we avoid addressing both the root motivations for drug use and the wider social-cultural context in which drug use (both recreational and problematic) sits. Taylor (2011: 25) in his analysis of the UK drugs strategy document (Home Office, 2010), observes that there is a preoccupation with problematic users who are characterised as using drugs due to a plethora of negative life experiences;

'The strategy is solely based on 'the fallen'. Those members of society who have 'a host of educational, health or social problems', with a background 'of childhood abuse, neglect, trauma or poverty', who are from 'vulnerable families with multiple problems' and who are 'truanting or excluded from school' or 'looked after children' (Home Office, 2010)'.

As such drug use is framed as being motivated by a series of devastating life experiences – these users do not choose to use drugs, rather their use is predetermined as a coping mechanism to their troubled

past/present. By funnelling the wider body of substance use towards a small group of identifiable others, we frame drug use as an outsider activity and associate it with a blanket of positivistic negativity which involves addiction, desperation and despair. Furthermore we intrinsically link these others to a host of social ills. The opening paragraph of the UK drug strategy (Home Office, 2010: 1) emphasises this stating;

‘This strategy sets out the Government’s approach to tackling drugs and addressing alcohol dependence, both of which are key causes of societal harm, including crime, family breakdown and poverty. Together, they cause misery and pain to individuals, destroy families and undermine communities. Such suffering cannot be allowed to go unchecked’.

Drugs it would seem are used by a group of others who are either fundamentally damaged to begin with (hence why they take drugs) or who become fundamentally different (and dangerous) because of their drug use. The latter of these in particular is utilised as ‘evidence’ that using drugs is destructive as it fundamentally changes individuals from the normative to the other. The media illustrate this process by using case studies of how individuals transform from ‘hero to addict’ (McLaughlin, 2015); ‘vicar’s daughter to a crack whore’ (The Sun, 2009); and royal harpist to criminal drug addict (Salkeld, 2009). In extreme cases users are posited as having transformed so far from their normative state that they are barely recognisable as zombies (Daily Mail, 2013), cannibals (Cutts, 2016) or junkies being eaten alive (Walker, 2011).

Indeed, this focus on individuals progressing from the normative to the drug using other has been a key theme in drugs education strategies. Campaign titles such as ‘Heroin screws you up’ and ‘Drugs to Mugs’ emphasise how drug use creates the other. A poignant example of this from the US is the Montana Meth Project’s ‘Meth: not even once’ campaign. The campaign materials utilise taglines which emphasise the process of the individual drug user becoming a fundamentally different entity: ‘before meth I had a daughter, now I have a prostitute’ and ‘before meth I had a brother, now I have a thief’. Additional taglines specifically illustrate the departure from the normative; ‘15 bucks for sex isn’t normal. But on meth it is’; ‘Beating an old man up for money isn’t normal. But on meth it is’; ‘Leaving a friend for dead isn’t normal. But on meth it is’.

Whilst the reductionist drugs discourse cements these notions as generically representative, a wider body of academic work has illustrated that this is only permissible when conceived through the narrow gaze. When one considers the fuller picture and moves ‘outside of the outsiders’ (Taylor, 2008), a much different understanding of the drugs status quo emerges. The question therefore is why, given that such knowledge exists, has this failed to penetrate mainstream discourse and be disseminated to broader publics outside the confines of higher education?

### **The expansion of the other**

Whilst this paper argues that a dominant drugs discourse exists, it is important to acknowledge that a plurality of discourses simultaneously co-exist which offer contrasting viewpoints. The very presence of such discourses could be used to criticise the notion that a ‘dominant discourse’ is even identifiable (Giulianotti, 1997) especially given the multiplicity of media platforms available to the public offering a variety of messages (Manning, 2013). Smith (2015: 266), however, contends that plural discourses can be accommodated ‘within the hegemonic routines of news coverage’ and that when ‘such ‘deviant’ views are imported into and reproduced within the news media, they do so “in terms derived from the dominant ideology” (Gitlin 1980, p.274)’. Smith makes an important point here as whilst ‘deviant views’ exist, they remain on the periphery and have very little success in challenging entrenched ideology.

Perhaps the most prominent alternative voices within drugs discourse are those arguing for drug policy reform. There are a number of pressure groups in this field who campaign relentlessly and their voices are sporadically united with professionals from the criminal justice and health spheres alongside celebrity activists. These voices are most prominent when official reports are published or high-profile professionals speak publicly about the potential merits of drug law reform. Whilst both the regularity of these discussions and the public's awareness of the concepts of decriminalisation and legalisation could again be used to criticise the notion that these alternative voices remain on the periphery, it is the response to these events that is the pivotal point here. There is a repetitive cycle at work each time such alternative voices are heard in the UK: the published report/individual receives immediate media coverage which conveys the drug reform message; coverage is then 'balanced' through the response of government officials and bodies who criticise such dangerous ideals, citing the dominant discourse as evidence that such idealistic thinking is flawed. This balancing simultaneously debunks the alternative voices and reaffirms the normative discourse;

'I don't believe in decriminalising drugs that are illegal today... I'm a parent with three children – I don't want to send out a message that somehow taking these drugs is okay and safe because, frankly, it isn't' (Prime Minister David Cameron responding to a Home Office report on International comparative drug policy, cited in Morris and Cooper, 2014).

'We have no intention of liberalising our drugs laws. Drugs are illegal because they are harmful – they destroy lives and cause untold misery to families and communities' (Home Office response to an ACMD report supporting drug decriminalisation, cited in Travis, 2011).

'Drugs such as heroin, cocaine and cannabis are extremely harmful and can cause misery to communities across the country....The government does not believe that decriminalisation is the right approach. Our priorities are clear; we want to reduce drug use, crack down on drug-related crime and disorder and help addicts come off drugs for good' (Home Office response to Ian Gilmore, former President of the Royal College of Physicians support for drug decriminalisation, cited in BBC News, 2010).

When David Cameron notes above that he does not want to send a message to his children that drug use is safe, he is intimating that alternative voices do exactly that; thus he frames such voices as the dangerous other. The reductionist discourse is utilised here to provide 'evidence' that the purveyors of such ideology are themselves risk inducing others whilst simultaneously legitimising drug prohibition. In light of this, these alternative voices are utilised as a tool through which to reaffirm the dominant discourse as *the* normative discourse and reiterate the message that drug use is dangerous.

Given the last decade has seen a number of drug policy reforms implemented in various jurisdictions, it could be argued that these alternative voices are actually enacting change. This is a valid point yet as Taylor et al. (2016) contest, these 'advances' in drug policy actually appear to be motivated by the very principles that lie at the heart of the reductionist discourse, with such reforms founded on the same capricious reasoning, moral dogma and lust to manage the risk of the other, as the historically dominant model of prohibition. Taylor et al. (2016) argue that such reforms maintain elements of drug prohibition resulting in the perpetuation of discrimination, criminalisation, imprisonment and coercive treatment of users. As a result the othering process is modernised and refined yet continues regardless of policy reform.

Furthermore, domestically in the UK, global drug policy reforms have become yet another cog in the othering process. Negative media reporting selectively focuses on the 'failures' of such policies (Doughty, 2014; Phillips, 2011), urging against any consideration of the dangerous drug policies being



implemented by these 'foreign others'. Furthermore, they are utilised as a political tool to reaffirm and legitimise drug prohibition. As Taylor et al. (2016) note, David Cameron's response to the Home Office (2014b) report on international comparative drugs policy (which emphasised that whilst such policies may work in certain socio-cultural contexts, these would not automatically transfer to the UK), was that the 'evidence is what we are doing is working' (cited in Morris and Cooper, 2014). Here comparative drug policies become the dangerous other.

Interestingly, the UK Home Office's report on comparative drug policy also seized the opportunity to emphasise that the current raft of global drug law reforms are not motivated by any desire to accommodate alternative voices and therefore they are not indicative of a fundamental move towards policy frameworks which seek to further understand or incorporate drug use into society – instead it reinforces the normative themes of the reductionist discourse stating (in relation to cannabis legalisation in the US) that such policies are motivated by a common aim of 'exercising greater control over the use of cannabis' (2014b:6) and that despite regulation a black market may continue therefore undermining 'the ability of state authorities to use taxes as a means of deterring consumption' (2014b: 39). Here drug law reforms are interpreted as attempts to further enhance drug control insinuating that the only possible motivations for such policies can be to further address the problematic nature of the drug using other.

Whilst the alternative voices of drug policy reform may have become a feature of public drug discourse (if only to be dismissed as dangerous ideology), a number of voices remain almost silent due to their taboo nature. Moore and Valverde (2000: 528) argue that the issue of pleasure for example is best referred to as 'the great unmentionable'. As Moore (2008: 355) notes there is 'a professional risk in writing about pleasure, of being identified as 'pro-drug' or accused of not taking seriously drug-related problems'. This is perhaps why individuals/organisations feel the need to confirm their adherence to the reductionist discourse, even when actively challenging this.

Phillip Boland in his critique of drugs policy notes: 'This article does not suggest that illegal drugs are harmless, nor does it celebrate or encourage illegal drug taking, rather it....' (2008: 182). Boland feels the need here to offer a justification for his comments as it would seem that even academics have to include caveats in their work which avoid them being associated with advocating issues outside of the dominant discourse. This theme is also apparent in drug services which sit outside the normative gaze. The Loop, a UK charity which provides testing of illegal drugs at festivals and clubbing events in order to inform users of content in an attempt to minimise harms, notes on its website that 'obviously all drugs are potentially dangerous and The Loop... do not encourage or condone any drug use' (The Loop, 2015). Here, the risk of being othered leads to the need to declare your allegiance to the (anti-drugs) reductionist discourse so as to pre-empt calls of being pro-drugs.

Hunt et al., (2010: 119) posit that it is '...surprising that the element of pleasure should have been so often overlooked in the thousands of articles written on the use of illicit drugs' and that 'even when notions of pleasure or fun are allowed to enter the picture, they are mentioned merely to be denied or negated'. Perhaps however this is not overly surprising. It would seem that those who dare discuss the taboo risk social chastisement and, indeed, becoming othered themselves. For example:

In 2012, the author delivered a public lecture in New Zealand focussing on the potential benefits of illegal drug use. Whilst the subject gained attention in the national media, the reports saw the same 'balancing' as identified above. The New Zealand Drug Foundation Executive Director was quoted in one report stating there was a 'significant risk' that talking about the positives of drugs could draw more people into drug use and that 'Providing factual, honest information to people about the real

health effects; we've still got a long way to go on that, before we even start trying to flip it around and talk about the positives' (cited in Garret-Walker, 2012).

In 2009, Professor David Nutt, Chair of the UK's ACMD was removed from his position. Nutt had contended that people were statistically more at risk when horse riding than when taking ecstasy, and that certain illegal drugs such as ecstasy, cannabis and LSD were less harmful than alcohol (Nutt, 2012). The response to this break from the dominant discourse was decisive with Nutt referred to in the media as a 'ninnybrained menace' and a 'nutty professor who is distorting the truth about drugs' (Silverman, 2012). The then Prime Minister Gordon Brown, justifying Nutt's removal, stated 'We cannot send out a message to young people that it's OK to experiment with drugs and to move on to hard drugs' and that instead 'we have to show we are tough on drug dealing and the problems that drugs are causing in our communities' (cited in The Telegraph, 2009).

Here the transmitters of 'alternative voices' became the other: by irresponsibly enhancing risk and simultaneously failing to consider 'real' issues they pose a threat to normative society. It would appear that only 'messages' which adhere to the reductionist discourse are permitted. As Smith (2015: 265) notes 'media coverage highlights the context and implications of research and policies but effectively side-lines the 'challenge' of evidence against the status quo'.

### **Reinforcing the other**

Richard Garside, Director of the UK Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, commented in the wake of Professor Nutt's sacking that;

'I'm shocked and dismayed that the home secretary appears to believe that political calculation trumps honest and informed scientific opinion. The message is that when it comes to the Home Office's relationship with the research community honest researchers should be seen but not heard' (cited in Tran, 2009)

It is interesting here that Garside, whilst bemoaning the ability of the political elite to shut down alternative voices, comments on the Home Office's relationship with the research community. In the last three decades drug use in the UK has been firmly posited as a criminal justice issue and within this context governmental funding for empirical research stemmed from the Home Office itself. The focus of this research centred almost entirely on the need to explore the link between problematic drug users, offending behaviour and the effectiveness of systems designed to manage these (Bennett, 2000; Budd et al., 2005; Holloway et al., 2005).

These studies utilise samples of problematic drug users whose use appears to be having negative implications for themselves and wider society. They therefore fit within the normative framework of research which focuses on the harm and risks associated with drug use and which consequently further enhance the themes of the reductionist discourse (Holt and Treloar, 2008; Moore, 2008). These studies provide statistical evidence which fits into the normative gaze. The narrow gaze is not only maintained, but further 'evidenced' and perpetuated. The other here is actively reinforced by the academic research community.

As Moore (2008) highlights, stepping outside of the normative gaze offers the academic little in terms of attracting research funding or being able to influence policy and practice. In a climate where 'universities must position themselves as 'research intensive'' (Ibid: 355) and for research to have an 'impact' (REF, 2014) a diversion away from the norm of quantitative research into drug related crime, harm, risk and the efficacy of systems to manage these offers few apparent

rewards. Even if one does divert from the norm, a number of hurdles remain in place which hinder the ability to communicate such alternative voices to wider publics.

Nutt (2015: 1), offers three explanations as to why scientific research which frames drug use in line with normative ideology dominates public discourse in the UK whilst alternative voices struggle to challenge such conceptualisations; firstly, new knowledge which fits the reductionist discourse and posits the harm of certain substances makes headlines but subsequent research which questions the accuracy of such findings receives little attention; secondly, the public have been groomed (by the reductionist discourse) to construct illegal drug use along certain lines, therefore new knowledge which validates entrenched understanding is appealing whilst that which questions this is difficult to adjust to and 'easier to just ignore' due to not wanting to believe that 'we have been misled for all these years'. Thirdly, that;

'Scientists examining the health and social impacts of drugs are usually funded by government agencies, and they often highlight the negative effects of drugs to justify their own source of funding... The more harmful the drug appears to be, the more critical it is to fund research on it, so their funding is perpetuated. By contrast, if use of a drug appears to have only benign effects, then why would the government bother spending more research money on it? This cycle has perpetuated a scientific industry intent on demonstrating the harmful effects of drugs... Of course, one of the major consequences of this cycle is that research on the potential benefits of drugs gets side-lined...'

Arguably, the current climate actively resists the development and dissemination of new knowledge which questions the status quo thereby reinforcing the other. Contemporary drugs research has developed a recognisable pattern. A new drug emerges; there is a media and political response based on scant research evidence; government funded research is undertaken as a knee-jerk reaction which focuses on harm, risk and negative outcomes whilst a dearth of research is undertaken on the attractiveness, pleasures and benefits of use. Subsequently there is a continued failure to develop an understanding of the motivations for experimental, recreational or even 'problematic' drug use whilst virtually no research is undertaken on the therapeutic and medicinal potentials of the drug (a great disservice to those suffering life limiting or threatening illnesses).

The current (politically compliant) research cycle provides evidence which only reaffirms the themes of the reductionist discourse. Whilst such research has arguably enabled the development of more informed drug services for problematic users, it has simultaneously failed to challenge the expansion of these within a solely criminal justice context or contribute to the development of a wider drugs discourse (Brownstein, 2013). The other here is reinforced by the contemporary research climate which suppresses the development and dissemination of alternative knowledge.

Despite these barriers, there are a number of researchers who have assisted in the construction of a more encompassing, nuanced and meaningful dialogue which breaks away from the normative gaze. Whilst such studies have developed a more progressive academic understanding of drug use, they simultaneously struggle within such a hostile climate to overcome the entrenched drug discourse - the key challenge then, is to formulate a way to move beyond the other.

### **Moving beyond the other**

Having established the expansive and detrimental impact of the reductionist discourse and the othering process it is imperative to consider how we (as academics) might move beyond this. This is not an easy task as it involves expanding and disseminating knowledge whilst simultaneously challenging constructions of the other. There are, however, a number of key principles which may help us to advance.

Firstly, there is a need to expand the remit of research agendas to allow for a more universal consideration of drug use. As Brownstein (2013: 97) urges we must:

‘.... focus on appreciating and understanding the intricacy of the place of the chemical substances we call drugs in our personal and social lives, the underlying reasons and root causes of how and why those various substances relate to our personal experience, and how they can sometimes be harmful and at other times beneficial to the people who use them and the people around them. The key will be to engage in an open and honest social discourse and public debate that would increase opportunities for new evidence to be found and evaluated, new ideas to be tested, and new policies to be tried and assessed’.

There is a need, therefore, to develop a more holistic understanding of drugs, and move towards a more reasoned debate (Sturgeon-Adams, 2013), which sees substance use as a choice, as neither good nor bad, which recognises that drugs can evoke both pleasure and pain, which acknowledges both drug related benefits and harms, and which considers both the positive and negative outcomes of substance use. As Stuart McMillen’s (2012) illustration highlighted earlier, only one side of this discussion is currently evident in public discourse. As Moore (2008: 358) notes around the absence of pleasure from normative discourse;

‘It exposes a fundamental and ongoing refusal by the drugs field to accept the close interweaving of drug use and contemporary forms of culture – an ongoing inability to genuinely step outside the pathology paradigm. Making drugs and pleasure more visible might be a first step towards creating a discursive space in which, as Driscoll (2000, p. ix) has argued in the US context, ‘we can construct other discourses about drugs [and, we might add, about drug users] that will not produce the damaging consequences that we are currently experiencing’.

The most promising method of developing such knowledge may be in the form of longitudinal mixed methods ethnographical research with drug users, their families, friends, colleagues, employers etc. There needs to be richness to the data collated which provides a detailed insight into the place of drug use within each individual’s socio-cultural setting. Such research is currently undertaken by a number of academics but takes place in a vacuum. This then competes against the (governmentally funded) large-scale quantitative studies which are able to statistically evidence the negative impacts of drug use, such as the rates and cost of drug related crime and the financial implications for health services and welfare provision. Individual academics undertaking in-depth research with small samples cannot hope to challenge such a body of work. The only way that this can be achieved is through a collective movement. There is a need for the critical academic community to develop an ambitious research agenda with collaborative nationwide studies at its core. These studies have to be rooted in pragmatism with the end goal of developing a more holistic understanding of drug use. Such studies will also need to be innovative and include methodologies which allow for the qualitative and quantitative measurement of aspects such as pleasure and positive/beneficial drug use, alongside any negative aspects.

Secondly, in order to extend the narrow parameters of empirical studies academics have to avoid falling into the usual politically compliant research (Moore, 2008) which focuses on unrepresentative samples of drug users but which attracts funding and fits more comfortably within the UK's Research Excellent Framework<sup>iii</sup>. The motivation to expand the criminological imagination must be driven by a desire to further understand the socio-cultural place of drugs, recognise their social benefits, be aware of their harms, and to ultimately provide robust advice and appropriate policy based on a well-rounded evidence base rather than on research outcomes that fulfil the criteria of higher education.

Academics are currently reinforcing the othering process via the production of knowledge which complies with normative prohibitionist notions and through their compromising of core principles for incremental policy gains (Taylor et al., 2016). There is a need therefore to avoid adding to the already imposing structures which silence our alternative voices and to emphasise in our work that socio-cultural understandings of drug use should always be understood within the context of the damaging principles of prohibitionist drug policy and the reductionist discourse. The work of both the Beckley Foundation and Drug Science in the UK should encourage critical scholars as they demonstrate that funding for research sitting outside of normative parameters can be attained - there remains, however, a need to advance the body of evidence collated by such groups to develop a richer socio-cultural understanding of substance use and how this relates to drug policy (see for example Wakeman, 2015).

Thirdly, there is a need to enhance our alternative voices, to be pro-active in our public engagement and innovative in how we articulate and disseminate our work to wider publics (Brownstein 2013). Whilst there are a number of individual academics who currently attempt such engagement (via individual websites; use of social media), a carefully orchestrated strategy of collective public criminology is required. This will need to involve online platforms, but most importantly a determination for the end destination of research to be the public sphere and not peer reviewed journals. A potential way forward is for each research report/article to be accompanied by a short on-line video (see Farrall, 2014; University of Leicester, 2014) which can be easily distributed to media, political and public channels via social-media. Additionally, the collective will need to be prepared to speak publicly about their work, to be outspoken, to avoid adding caveats through fear of being seen as pro-drugs, and to stand firm. Such tactics will undoubtedly see individual's othered but there is a need, as a collective, to resist and to stay resolute as it is only through amplifying our alternative voices that we can increase opportunities to feed meaningfully into policy discussions and to therefore move away from simply bemoaning the status quo.

## **Conclusion**

This article critically engages with the social and political mechanisms that are used to construct 'the drug user' and how we, as a society, respond to the 'drug problem' in the UK. In addition to this, the discussion deconstructs the process of othering and examines how this has been both expanded and reinforced in contemporary society. The importance of this process cannot be overstated as it allows for continued misunderstands of the socio-cultural motivations, functions and outcomes of drug use to dominate public discourse. Consequently we fail to develop a holistic appreciation of the place and role of drugs in society and instead revert to entrenched assumptions, driven more by moral ideology than scientific evidence, more by fear than pragmatism, and more by a need to control risk than a need to respect human rights and minimise harms. As such we continue to adhere (even where reform takes place) to damaging policies of drug prohibition. Unless we break the shackles of the reductionist discourse we will continue to limit our ability to provide effective drug services and interventions to those who require them due to the inability of holistic knowledge to penetrate mainstream discourse and therefore influence policy and practice.

Whilst the entrenched nature of the reductionist discourse is such that challenging normative assumptions may appear both difficult and fraught with dangers, critical academics have to move forward with determination: hopefully the key principles set out in this paper offer one pathway towards doing so. It is no longer acceptable for academics to simply bemoan: the lack of legitimacy in the drug classification system; the harmful impact of drug prohibition; or to argue for/against the merits of drug policy reform. Instead there needs to be collective action which strengthens the already healthy body of research in this field, whilst communicating such knowledge more effectively to wider audiences – as academics it is our civic duty to minimise the harm to those being othered by formulating knowledge, finding our voice and pressing for policy reform, even if this is in part motivated by the realisation that we are being othered ourselves.

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<sup>i</sup> The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs is funded by the UK Home Office and tasked with advising government on issues of drug control and classification.

<sup>ii</sup> Frequent users are defined as those who use an illegal substance more than once a month on average.

<sup>iii</sup> The Research Excellent Framework (REF) is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in Higher Education. Each REF submission is assessed on three criteria; the quality of research outputs; the social, economic and cultural impact of research; and the research environment of the submitting department.