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Ecstasy, Gender and Accountability in a Rave Scene

The aim of this paper is to examine the accomplishment of gender in the context of the youth cultural formation of dance raves. Drawing on a narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with 300 young women and men in a San Francisco rave scene, we examine the role that the drug ecstasy plays in the gender formations at these events. We present evidence to show that using ecstasy within the social context of raves allows increased gender flexibility and alternatives to conventional notions of femininity and masculinity. This is particularly apparent in the ways that young women exhibit greater sexual assertiveness and young men demonstrate increased affective and communicative displays. Yet at the same time, their narratives provide ample evidence that gender accomplishment in this context does not occur outside the bounds of gender accountability and behaviors seen as gender inappropriate are actively policed and sanctioned.¹

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Introduction

For decades, the stereotypical image of a drug user was male; an image that was long replicated within drug research literature. When women appeared in the literature, it was traditionally within a «pathology and powerlessness» perspective.² Women drug users were portrayed as perpetual victims, their drug use treated as pathological, and notions of women's agency or pleasures were missing.³ Although men comprised the norm in drug research, their gender typically remained unanalyzed or invisible.⁴ Similarly, when sexuality was discussed within drug research, it generally was reduced to a problem status, such as analyzing the links between drug use and sexual disease transmission.⁵ Rarely foregrounded were issues of the body, gender or sexual identities, or pleasure and agency.

Feminist scholars achieved inroads in drug scholarship in the 1990s, highlighting women's agency and the centrality of gender dynamics in drug selling⁶ and drug consumption⁷, from inner-city drug use⁸ to the dance/club scenes⁹. Studies of rave and club cultures often emphasize the empowerment and freedom experienced by women in these scenes. Feminist scholars have produced a few key works highlighting the experience of young women in the dance scenes, particularly in British contexts. Among these key works are Sheila Henderson's analyses of women drug users in the dance scene¹⁰, Maria Pini's study of women clubbers and ravers¹¹, and Fiona Hutton's book on gender, risk, and pleasure among women clubbers¹².

These key works focus on women in British dance scenes; a comparable breadth of scholarship on gender and sexuality in the American club and rave context does not exist. While all three books mention issues of changing femininities and masculinities in these contexts, they focus primarily on women drug users, leaving explorations of the relationship between masculinities,

club drugs, and the dance scenes less developed. While none of these ignore the issues of drugs entirely, the role, centrality, and effects of drugs within these scenes are sometimes downplayed or seen as secondary, leaving room for analyses that place drug issues more centrally at the core. Our own study was an attempt to complement these works by studying discussions of femininities, masculinities, and sexualities among young club-drug users in the San Francisco rave and club scenes.

Within the mainstream drug literature gender is not entirely ignored. Certainly it is common within epidemiology to assess whether or not men or women in a sample have higher rates of drug consumption. But what is left out by focusing on the quantitative differences in men and women's drug use? The effects of drugs on the performance or accomplishment of gender are much less often examined sociologically. Measham makes this point, arguing that «drug use is not just mediated by gender, but, far more significantly, drug use and the associated leisure, music, and style cultures within which drug use is located are themselves ways of accomplishing a gendered identity»¹³. She draws on Messerschmidt's ideas of gender as structured action¹⁴, which are rooted in the sociological analysis of the accomplishment of gender¹⁵. From this perspective gender is not something we possess, or simply are, but rather something that we accomplish in social interactions. Measham argues that it's not just that gender influences doing drugs (e.g. men and women have different rates of drug use or prefer different substances), but that «drug use itself can be seen as a way of doing gender»¹⁶. Our study attempts to extend this line of analysis by exploring the accomplishment of gender in a rave scene.

Methods and Sample

We conducted in-depth, mixed-methods interviews with 300 club drug users in the rave and club scenes in the San Francisco area. The sample was young (median age=20), and ethnically diverse, with 50% identifying as white, 23% Asian American, 11% Latino/Hispanic, 6% African American, 10% «other», and 6% iden-



tifying as primarily «mixed». We did not find stark differences among or between various racial/ethnic groups and identities in the sample with respect to issues of gender or sexuality. Instead, differences relating to gender and sexual display, performance, and accomplishment, were much more closely aligned with the respondents' involvement in one particular sub-scene versus another (e.g., being in more underground scenes versus being a «candy kid»¹⁷ versus being in the mainstream club scene) rather than along the lines of race, ethnicity, or class.

Of the 300 young men and women we interviewed, 276 (92%) had used ecstasy at some point in their lives.¹⁸ The qualitative analysis in this article draws from these 276 respondents. Among the ecstasy users, 47.5% were women and 52.5% were men. 75% of the respondents identified as heterosexual, 8% as homosexual, lesbian or gay, 14% as bisexual, and 3% as «other». Although there were a few minor variations, we found very few significant differences in the drugs consumed by men and women in our sample (comparing past-month, past-year, and lifetime reported use). Also we found no significant differences between men and women with respect to the most commonly used drugs in the sample (marijuana, ecstasy, and mushrooms). This chapter, then, focuses not on whether men or women are more or less likely to consume particular drugs, but rather on men and women's interpretations of this drug use, their understanding of the social context, and their narratives of drug use, gender, and sexuality.

Gender, Sexuality and the Pleasures of Ecstasy in the Rave Context

In general, most of the young men and women we interviewed, whether ravers or clubbers, or both, described a stark difference between the culture and experiences of clubs versus that of raves. Clubs, they often described as being alcohol-fueled meat-markets,

in which clothing styles and dancing styles are highly sexualized, gendered expectations are heavily enforced, and interactions with others often have a tinge of aggression (or sometimes outright fights and violence). Raves, on the other hand, are seen as dominated by warmth, niceness and the drug ecstasy. While normative behavior encourages touching and feeling of friends and strangers, blatantly sexual displays or expectations are frowned upon and more flexible gender dynamics are encouraged. These would be the two stereotypical pictures of raves and clubs that most commonly emerged in our interviews. For many of the ravers, the spectre of the club seemed to operate as the «other» against which they defined themselves, much like Thornton's clubbers' utilization of the opposition between underground and mainstream.¹⁹ However the boundaries between the categories of rave and club, ecstasy and alcohol, sociability and sexuality, are not necessarily nearly so neat as many of the descriptions at first seem to indicate. We find ecstasy and alcohol (among other substances) being consumed at or around (preceding or after) both events, the oppositionality between ecstasy and sexuality that some young men and women describe is far from the experience of others we interviewed. While perhaps being more open or flexible, many young man and women describe continued enforcement of gendered norms at raves as well.

A common theme in our respondents' narratives revolved around the pleasure of the expressive or performative qualities of ecstasy²⁰, the way that it allowed them to be someone else, or to be who they «really» were by expressing themselves more freely and by coming out of their shells. Fears of being too loud, of being too public, of being a spectacle were particularly expressed by young women, reflecting the different gender expectations for social behavior for adolescent and young adult males versus females. Their discussions of how using ecstasy at raves helps them to alle-



viate these issues were not simply about the physiological effects of the drugs alone. The particular social nature and context of the setting of use is essential to these performances and its effects. In the rave scene, they described a freedom to be who they are, which is a freedom they do not often enjoy in day to day life.

Some emphasized that, contra clubs, they experienced freedom from pressures of heteronormative sexual display and codes for dress and comportment that are expected of them at dance clubs, as well as the norms of «hook up» culture. The idea that ecstasy enables freedom from the kinds of sexualized sociability²¹ expected in many nightlife scenes may seem surprising, given ecstasy's reputation among some as being a «sexual drug». Among the young club-drug users we interviewed, we found a range of opinions about the relationship between ecstasy and sex: from completely separating the two, to seeing the two intimately fused, to seeing ecstasy as sensual but not connected to sex per se. Some describe an enhanced libido while on the drug and say that it «brings out that sexual side» (Cassie, 27, heterosexual). Although some discussions of ecstasy use in the context of raves present these as totally separate from sex and sexual pursuits, we did not find this to be the case in all of our respondents' narratives.

The effects of ecstasy have different ramifications for men and for women in the rave scene, but result in gender deviations from prescribed roles for both men and women. For some women, the increase in libido coupled with the loss of inhibitions creates an ability to express sexuality and sexual assertiveness in a way inconsistent with conventional gender expectations. For some men, the devaluation of sexual display in favor of empathy or an emotion bond with other men (perhaps even expressing sexual feelings towards other men) also are distinct deviations from our culture's idea of traditional, normative masculinity.

To understand the pleasures and appeals of ecstasy, then, it

is necessary to attend to the way the drug enables certain performances and identities and the way it allows for different gendered selves.²² By examining the language our respondents used to talk about their experiences and perceptions of ecstasy use, it became clear how ecstasy use contributes to gender deviation, but also how deviators were actively policed by their friends and fellow party-goers. For both men and women, we saw challenges to hegemonic gender expectations as well as the continuation of gender accountability in this social setting.

Ecstasy, Sexuality, and Femininities

One common gender assumption is that men are inherently more sexual, and more sexually aggressive, than women. Many women who use ecstasy seemed to turn this idea on its head; they described the ecstasy experience as a sexual one and aggressively acted on those urges. They described ecstasy as enabling women to be not just sexual objects, but sexual subjects in their own right. Whether ecstasy allows them to express feelings they already harbored or creates new sensations, the fact remains that it is often considered a deviation from traditional femininity for a young woman to express her sexuality in such a manner. Of course, this behavior is not unambiguously «progress». We want to guard against a too optimistic reading of women's expanded roles in nightlife and expanded substance consumption. Nor should talk of expanded freedoms of nightlife blind us to the continuing reality of sexual harassment or assault that many young women experience at or after these events. Still, a number of women interviewed described their experiences using ecstasy at raves as liberating or empowering. In addition, ecstasy use also seems to facilitate non-normative behavior in that it allows some heterosexual women to explore same-sex contact.

In many interviews, ecstasy was invoked by young men and

women to explain or excuse non-normative gender practices. Peralta analyzed how alcohol can provide a face-saving excuse for non-normative gender behavior by providing excuses that counter the deviance or «ease the shame associated with inappropriate gender displays».²³ Our findings are similar and show that ecstasy gives license to young women to take risks and be bolder in pursuit of romantic partners because it protects against shame or stigma that may otherwise accompany these behaviors.

Peralta²⁴ suggests that the risks of gender assessment, or what we discuss as accountability, are suspended while the user is under the influence of alcohol (or, presumably ecstasy). We found, however, that accountability does not disappear entirely. Our analysis of young men's and women's gender accomplishment in the rave scene and with ecstasy use highlights the continuing presence of gender accountability, even in this setting that would initially appear to be freer of strict gender expectations. While individual ecstasy-using women may feel their displays of sexuality are acceptable, at least while on ecstasy or in the context of the rave, this non-traditional feminine behavior does not go unnoticed by others in the dance scene. As with many transgressions of gender norms, others move quickly to try to stop the transgression from occurring or try to re-frame it in a more gender-normative context.

Often, women using ecstasy are stopped from expressing some of the less gender-normative effects of ecstasy, such as an increase in sexual behavior. A number of the men and women we interviewed discussed needing to «protect» female ecstasy users from doing «something they'll regret». Although the language of «men taking advantage of women» is frequently used in these narratives, these young men rarely discuss «policing» those men who might take advantage and instead focus on policing women's behavior that is seen as enabling. It is not merely the «preying» behaviors of men that they worry about, but a woman's own aggressive sexual behaviors are seen as something from which she needs protection. Though many ravers attempt to curb the non-normative sexuality of their female friends and peers while using ecstasy, they in no way attempt to curb the very same behaviors, which comprise normative sexuality, of their male friends.

Ecstasy, Sexuality, and Masculinities

Commentators on the dance scene have often noted the changing norms of masculinity in this youth cultural formation. They note the increased acceptability of displays of emotion, friendliness, or non-traditional masculine displays and attire, and less acceptance of aggression and sexually predatory behavior in these scenes.²⁵ We clearly saw these challenges to traditional masculinity in the discussions of rave and ecstasy cultures among the men and women we interviewed. However, like the women above, men indicated that gender deviations are not accomplished without accountability.

One way ecstasy allows men to transgress traditional gender boundaries is by making it unnecessary to be traditionally «aggressive» and masculine. In addition, some young men described a change in relationships with women while using ecstasy as they placed less importance on casual sex and «hooking up». These descriptions of men being more emotional, open, able to connect with same-sex friends more easily, and being able to appreciate the opposite sex for less sexual reasons are all considered conventionally feminine characteristics. For these young men, the ecstasy experience allows them to escape their gender expectations and have a different sort of experience. «Male bonding», in particular, seems enabled by the use of ecstasy.

For some, it appeared that their different behavior is confined to the social context of raves or to when they are using ecstasy, others argue that this new openness and ability to express affections between men spills out into their everyday world as well. Peralta, in his study of the effects of alcohol on the accomplish-

ment of gender among college students, notes two major divisions in how alcohol and gender-deviant behaviors of men are accomplished. On the one hand, he discusses men who intentionally practice gender-nonconformist behaviors while drinking, using alcohol to counter negative appraisals. On the other hand, there are those for whom alcohol leads to «gender blunders» – accidental gender norm violations for which alcohol provides a post facto excuse.²⁶ This pattern can be seen particularly in the instances of those heterosexual-identified men who engage in same-sex intimacies while on ecstasy or at raves.

Although for many of the men ecstasy opens up homosocial bonding, for others ecstasy helps enable homosexual acts (although in most of the described cases this is limited to kissing, touching, and «making out»). Some straight men describe same-sex experiences while on ecstasy, while some of the bisexual and gay men cite ecstasy use as a factor contributing to some of their first same-sex experiences. In some cases, we saw heterosexual-identified men being quite comfortable discussing same-sex experiences at raves. Here we can see a fluidity of sexual roles and norms, challenging the idea of sexual identity as a static or fixed trait. In dealing with this topic, we also found a second group of men who understood their same-sex actions to be blunders, which they explain or excuse through their ecstasy use.

As with the case of ecstasy, sexuality, and femininity, there are more flexible gender options and norms with regard to the social context of masculinity at raves, which are perceived to be influenced by the consumption of ecstasy. As with the case of the women, however, there are limits to this openness, and gender remains policed and accountability continues to shape interactions and experiences in this context. Ecstasy use did not entirely excuse men from conventional expectations to accomplish heterosexual masculinity. As with the policing of female sexuality described previously, men's gender performances are policed by their peers within the rave scene despite the setting's reputation for openness and acceptance. Users themselves, along with the larger community, were quick to outline unacceptable behavior through the language they used. While some ravers found these breaks from conventional gender expectations to be freeing, others found them disturbing or problematic.

Some respondents expressed uneasiness that having these sorts of interactions somehow undercut their masculinity and made them seem «gay». The accusation of the «gayness» of certain behaviors was a primary way in which young men were held accountable for their gendered behaviors at raves. The sentiment that ecstasy makes you «gay» caused some men to actively avoid ecstasy because they were worried about this perception. Other men distanced themselves from situations where they might behave in ways deemed inappropriate. They went out of their way to make sure that same-sex contact never happened or avoided using ecstasy in settings that were predominately male. Importantly, though, even though some men and women used «gay» to describe ecstasy users, they only used it to describe male users. The use of this term was not simply using «gay» as a synonym for «lame» or «un-cool» as is often the case in youth slang. These accusations were often disconnected from any actual sexual behavior or interactions on the men's parts, but was more connected to styles of dance, dress, comportment, or affect. That is because in this case «gay» hardly refers to a sexual identity, but instead to what some respondents saw as an inappropriate masculinity. So men, like women, were policed and police themselves both by using language to distance themselves from non-normative behavior and also by not placing themselves in situations that may lead to same-sex sexual behavior. These men were held accountable to others and held themselves accountable to normative masculine heterosexual roles.

Conclusion

This chapter offers an analysis of gender and sexuality in the context of young people's ecstasy use in the rave scene in San Francisco. We focused not primarily on whether gender differences shape drug use rates or prevalence, but rather on how ecstasy use, and practices surrounding it, help to shape the accomplishment of gender in a particular youth cultural scene. The young men and women in this rave scene described the pleasures of ecstasy use as including the pleasures of being able to act differently from how they are expected to act in other situations, to express themselves more fully and to explore less narrow gender performances. Young women described ecstasy as giving them more confidence and self-acceptance and less fear of being a spectacle. This confidence, for some of the women, extended to greater sexual confidence and assertiveness. For young men this often meant a greater ability and acceptance of displaying emotion, empathy, and physical affection (including toward their male friends) and a de-emphasis on sexual pursuit. But even in the context of ecstasy use in the rave scene, with its espoused ethos of gender flexibility, there continue to be significant limits on the expressions of gender and sexuality. Men and women describe needing to shut down the greater sexual assertiveness of young women in the scene, to protect them against «predators» but also to protect them from themselves. Many young men in the scene face accusations of seeming or acting «too gay» if their gender displays in the scene are deemed insufficiently masculine. While there may be some small room within this scene for some young men and women to begin to transform the ways they accomplish gender, this is not done in the absence of accountability, of being held accountable to normative expectations of what it means to act like a woman or a man.

Because men and women operate against the backdrop of two very different sets of gender expectations, we cannot examine their experiences with exactly the same lens. Just as it is outside traditional gender expectations for women to be sexually aggressive, it is perfectly within the realm of gender conventionality for young men. Conversely, the sensitivity and emotional nature that is usually positively attributed to women may be attacked and belittled when it appears in men. Many members of the ecstasy-using community embrace the gender flexibility that ecstasy allows. However, this does not preclude many of these behaviors from being seen and treated as deviations even in this context. There is no easy answer to a question of whether raves and ecstasy permit a challenge to gender norms. Rave participants describe a possibility for challenges to these norms and to gender and sexual flexibility and they cite both the rave culture and the effects of ecstasy as being key contributors to this. But they also describe situations in which quite traditional gendered and sexual expectations continue to be enforced and which can significantly limit these challenges. It seems gender accountability is not so easily escaped. ●

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Endnotes

- 1 This piece is taken from our book: Hunt/Moloney/Evans 2010. Corresponding author: Geoffrey Hunt, huntgisa@ix.netcom.com
- 2 Cf. Anderson 2005, ibid 2008, Maher 1997.
- 3 Cf. Etorre 2004.
- 4 Cf. Broom 1995.
- 5 Cf. Ostrow/Shelby 2000, Ross/Williams 2001.
- 6 Cf. Maher 1997, Taylor 1993.
- 7 Cf. Etorre 1992.
- 8 Cf. Bourgeois 1996, Hunt/Joe-Laidler/Evans 2002.
- 9 Cf. Henderson 1996.
- 10 Cf. Henderson 1993, ibid. 1996, ibid. 1999.
- 11 Cf. Pini 1997, ibid. 2001.
- 12 Cf. Fiona Hutton 2006.
- 13 Measham 2002: 335.
- 14 Cf. Messerschmidt 1997.
- 15 Cf. West and Fenstermaker 1995, West and Zimmerman 1987.
- 16 Measham 2002: 335.
- 17 Candy kids wearing bright clothes and plastic jewelry often associated with the rave scene.
- 18 See Hunt/Moloney/Evans 2010 for a detailed discussion of drug use patterns in this sample.
- 19 Cf. Thornton 1996.
- 20 Cf. Duff 2008.
- 21 Cf. Green/Halkitis 2006.
- 22 see also Duff 2008.
- 23 Peralta 2008: 373.
- 24 Cf. Peralta 2008.
- 25 see Avery 2005, Henderson 1997, ibid. 1999, McRobbie 1995, Measham/Aldridge 2001, Pini 1997.
- 26 Cf. Peralta 2008.