Community-mindedness in illicit drug cultures: Protective capacities and implications for policy and intervention

Gemeinsinn in Drogensubkulturen: Schutzfähigkeit und Ansatzpunkte für Politik und Interventionen

Prof. Dr. Anke Stallwitz

University of Applied Sciences Freiburg

Department of Social Work

stallwitz@eh-freiburg.de

Overview of presentation

1. Central results of study on **Shetland heroin scene**
2. **Evolution** of drug cultures
3. **Self-regulation** of drug cultures with a focus on **community-mindedness**
4. **Practical recommendations** derivable from Shetland study and other research

Brief summary of the study

- **Research question:**

  „How do heroin users of different styles in Shetland perceive and represent the nature and socio-historical developments of the local heroin scene?"

- Data collection over two months in Lerwick, Shetland, from beginning of May until beginning of July 2004

Island

Shetlandinseln

Norwegen

Schweden

Irland

Däne-
mark

Vereinigtes
Königreich

Nieder-
lande

Deutschland

Data collection & analysis: Interviews and documents

- Interviews with 24 Shetland heroin users:
  - **14 clients** of Shetland Community Drug Service (most clients in employment and with permanent accommodation)
  - **10 non-clients** including **4 occasional users**
- 11 expert interviews with local representatives from drugs intervention and policy, the social welfare system, youth work, medical sector, police and media
- Analysis of relevant statistics and news paper articles from 2004 until 2010
- Ethnographic field work

General evolution of drug scenes (Golub, Johnson & Dunlap, 2005)*

- **1. Incubation phase**: Sub-population starts using a new drug
- **2. Expansion phase**: Drug is introduced to wider subgroups of users with individually varying susceptibility
- **3. Plateau phase**: Most susceptible persons have now taken up using, and consumption is temporarily widespread
- **4. Decline phase**: Using rates decrease as general acceptability of drug decreases; overall drug use often endures as some people continue using; thus, drug eras often overlap.

* National Development and Research Institutes Inc., New York

The Shetland heroin scene and its historical course

- Definition of *Scene:* Social network of a partial culture (here interchangeably used with 'subculture')
- On basis of user interviews identification of **five eras**
- Course of Shetland heroin scene corresponding to:
  - Model of drug evolution (Golub, Johnson & Dunlap, 2005)
  - Courses of other illegal drug scenes, e.g. NYC heroin and crack subcultures at previous points in time (cf. Curtis, 2003; Spunt, 2003)
- <u>Assumption:</u>

  Illegal drug scenes typically follow universal pattern that can be specified by scientific analysis

The five eras of the Shetland heroin scene

I. The Early Days

- **Duration:** Late 70s - late 80s
- **Establishment:** Urban hippies and oil workers
- **Descriptive characteristics:** Small, „invisible", mainly „responsible" smoking use
- **Internal structure:** Communal, egalitarian, restricted and secret supply, strong sense of community-mindedness

  "Community-mindedness": Mutual care and clearly defined social sanctions of irregularities (encouraging 'pro-social' norms and rules)

II. The Era of the Old School

- **Duration:** Late 80s - late 90s
- **Change:** Market takeover by urban IV users
- **Descriptive characteristics:** Relatively small, rise in users, supplied amounts of heroin and IV use
- **Internal structure:** Flat hierarchy, supply and use controlled by stringent rules, strong sense of community-mindedness

Control rules promoting self-regulation of heroin scene

- Examples of control rules employed by the 'Old School':
    - No dealing for profit
    - No dealing to young people (under 25s), strangers or people known to behave ‚irresponsibly'
    - No use in front of young people
    - Strict secrecy of supply structures and personal use towards those not „initiated"
    - No assistance with injecting with people not able to inject themselves

    Otherwise sanctions from appealing to someone's conscience to exclusion from heroin supply
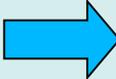
➡ **Internal balance** und **social integration** of the heroin scene for app. two decades until late 1990s

III. The Contained Commercialisation

- **Duration:** Late 90s - early 2001
- **Change:** Rave era, delayed adjustment to global heroin trend, market takeover by commercial dealer
- **Descriptive characteristics:** Rise in diverse, female and young users and IV and dependent using styles
- **Internal structure:** Supply structured-hierarchical, main dealer continues Old School rules apart from non-profit dealing

Old School control rules of main dealer in era III (Stallwitz, 2012, 220)

- **Gerry* (C)**: [...] When, when Peter* was doin' it [...] there would be spells where we would go through a bi' o' a drought. *Six to eight weeks* sometimes. [...] In a way i' was good, because everybody got back into a little break. An', ah, it caused problems for *some* people. Heavier users were kinda sufferin' for the six to eight weeks kinda thing. Bu' at the same time I 'ink in a way it was [...] *his* way of [...] tryin' to keep people's addictions from spirallin' out of control. The amount o' people wi' problematic addictions, I 'ink, he did try to keep a bi' of a lid on for tha' reason. He didn't want to be the one that was [...] to blame kinda thing [...] for a heroin epidemic in Shetland.

*names changed

IV. The Commercial Peak

- **Duration:** Early 2001 - early 2004
- **Change:** „Prison connection", „Soothmoother" influence, market takeover by two commercial dealers
- **Descriptive characteristics:** Strong rise in primarily young users, IV, risky and dependent forms of use
- **Internal structure:** Supply unstructured hierarchical, opening of market, reduction of control and community-mindedness

➡ Scene gradually loses internal controllability and thereby unobtrusive, social integration

V. The Fragmentation

- **Duration:** Since early 2004
- **Change:** Intensified repressions and arrest of dealers
- **Descriptive characteristics:** Temporary decline in heroin supply, then continuing rise in IV, risky and juvenile use
- **Internal structure:** Supply fragmented, egalitarian and community-minded only in small groups and by small dealers, general scene determined by commercial self-interest

➡ Continuous expansion of scene and urban tendencies until app. 2010 (end of official data collection 2010; update on state of scene February 2013 on expert conference in Shetland (cf. Shetland News, 14/2/13 http://www.shetnews.co.uk/news/6330-a-different-approach-to-tackling-drugs)

Impact of community-mindedness on self-regulating capacities of drug scenes I

- A drug scene will affect societal balance and public health least when:

  ➡ Scene is able of self-regulation by means of control rules

- Requirement for generation and effective implementation of control rules and maintenance of self-regulation:

  ➡ Strong sense of community-mindedness within scene (mutual care and clearly defined sanctions)

Impact of community-mindedness on self-regulating capacities of drug scenes II

- Community-mindedness furthers members' perception of scene as collective project:
    - Common interest in regulation and maintenance of scene
    - Sense of responsibility of dealers and experienced users
- General preference of communally oriented drug markets as indicated by present study and comparable research (cf. May, 1999; Spunt, 2003)
- Interference with (or breakdown) of community-mindedness possible through:
    - Rapid expansion of scene with enormous influx of new users
    - Massive police repression
- Possibility of society to (partially) replace function of responsible dealers and users ("steering of scene")
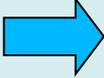
Model of evolution of drug scenes* applied to Shetland heroin scene

Fragmentation

Plateau

Comm. Peak

Cont. Comm.

Expansion

Decline

Old School

Early Days

Incubation

*acc. to Golub, Johnson & Dunlap (2005)

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Self-regulation of drug cultures

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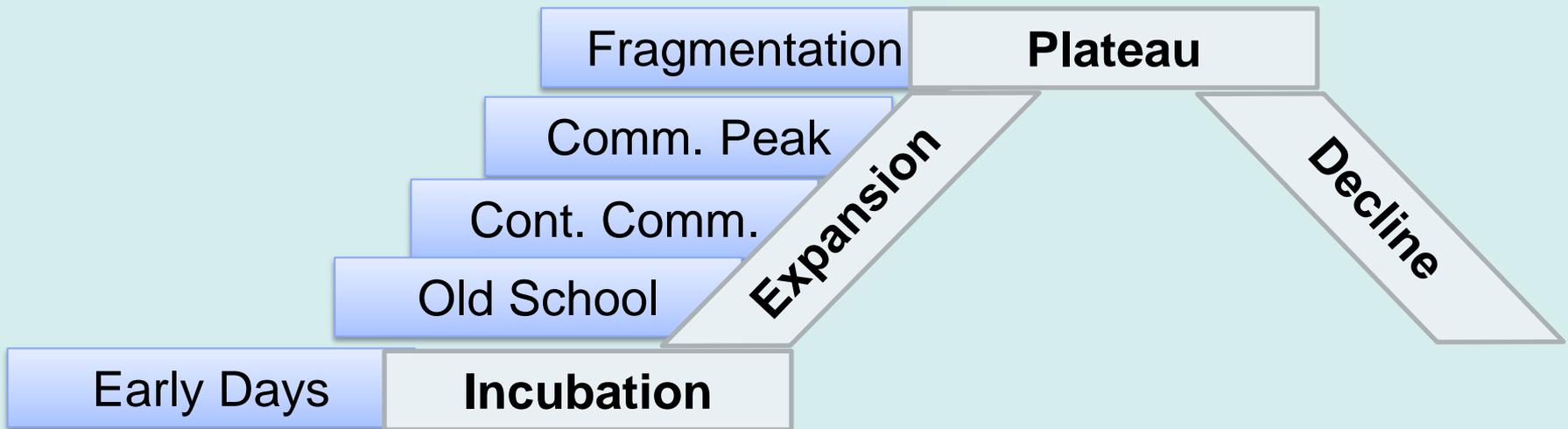
General assumptions on the nature of illicit drug scenes

- Illicit drug scenes pass through (scientifically accessible) **universal evolutionary pattern**

- Illicit drug scenes reflect **zeitgeist** (cf. Stallwitz, in print)

- Zeitgeist determines which social phenomena a society defines as **social *problems*** (cf. Bernard, 2013)

- Possibly at edge of **paradigm shift** with social redefinition of illicit drug use as less ideologised, emotionally laden social phenomenon more open to evidence-based policy approaches (indicated by Colorado, Uruguay, Schildower Kreis etc.)

Paradigm shift as prerequisite for evidence-based societal approach to drug use

- Assessment of (illicit) drug scenes according to their *actual impact* **on public health and social security** instead of moral and ideological condemnation per se

- By protection of social structure of scene community-mindedness-oriented norms and rules can purposefully be utilised

Practical recommendations on basis of Shetland study and other relevant research

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Self-regulation of drug cultures

Practical approaches to handling illegal drug scenes

1. **Research & policy:** Systematic analysis of drug scene in order to develop suitable harm minimising interventions

2. **Education & health system:** Neutral (non-stigmatising), socially integrated forms of conveying knowledge regarding drug issues (schools, public authorities, employment sector etc.)

3. **Police:** Cooperation with social institutions with focus on harm reducing rather than repressive measures

4. **Criminal justice:** Alternatives to prison focussing on socio-economic integration of dealers and users and disrupting criminal cycle

5. **Prevention & intervention:** Outreach and peer approaches utilising social structure of drug scenes; prevention approaches with focus on risk-taking competence; consideration of location- and time specific particularities

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Example case of long-term occasional heroin user (Oliver, late 40s)

- Use for 25 years between every few weeks and every few years
- First sniffing and later smoking use; IV never an option
- Use primarily with exclusive group of trusted friends
- Within group use ritualistic and consciously celebrated accompanied by sophisticated music and philosophical conversation
- Strong, ideational component => „Ontological experiment" (ontological => concerning the existence / being)
- <u>Attractivity of heroin:</u> *Confrontational,* outlawed drug, „personality drug", „ultimate drug outsider", use as „subversive activity"
- 25 years use was occasional and controlled, apart from one year when frequency was intensified to compensate for emotional stress
- Slight withdrawal symptoms as key experience => Abstinence from heroin until personal situation was stabilised, then reuptake with function of enjoyment and relaxation (rather than compensation)
- For two years style of use in line with 22 previous years