

Social Policy and Psychoactive Substances – summary

Many societies have regarded at least some psychoactive substances as a problem, but there have been very diverse approaches to dealing with them. Approaches have included regulation, taxation, treatment, persuasion, harm reduction and criminalisation, while aims have ranged from promoting public health to the preservation of social order. Social approaches to problems from psychoactive substances are set to change in coming years, with new substances entering the field along with new approaches to drug testing.

The Foresight project on Brain Science, Addiction and Drugs asked Professor Robin Room of the University of Stockholm, Sweden, to review policy studies on psychoactive substances.

He found that societies have a wide range of reasons for regulating psychoactive substances. These include avoiding harm to users and others (such as victims of passive smoking or of drunken driving), preserving public health, economic productivity and social order, and protecting the vulnerable, for example from domestic violence or other substance use-related crime.

As well as raising revenues and discouraging use, reasons for regulating psychoactive substances include restricting their use to specific purposes or groups, ensuring fairness, as with drugs in sport and perhaps in future with cognition enhancers; controls for religious or cultural reasons, as with Islam and alcohol; reinforcing public health; or encouraging hard work, public order and social stability.

Control of drugs or of people?

Control schemes vary in exactly what they control – the purchaser (for example by age), the material, its price, its quality, or its distribution channel (for example by making alcohol available only at a limited number of outlets). It is also possible to regulate the behaviour of the consumer after they have consumed, for example by laws against driving while intoxicated, or being intoxicated in public.

In many countries such methods coexist with other preventive approaches which use education, advertising, deterrence and other methods to discourage the use or harmful use of psychoactive substances, and treatment strategies for drug users.

The impact of policies

Recent decades have seen the emergence of strong international literatures on the impact of different policies and combinations of policies on substance use and problems. Particularly for alcohol and tobacco, there is a substantial literature on the effects of different policies, and estimations are now available also on cost-effectiveness. These studies are from countries relevant to the UK situation, but the UK

contribution to the alcohol policy literature, for instance, has not been strong. The international policy impact literature is much less developed for controls on illegal drugs and on psychopharmaceuticals. Room recommends that the UK commit itself to building a tradition of policy impact studies and policy-oriented research, so that future policy changes can be more strongly evidence-based.

The Future

The present regime for controlling drugs of abuse seems unlikely to remain unchanged. One area which is likely to grow in importance in policy decisions in the next 20 years is evidence on levels of harm. Tensions on policy approaches are likely to arise at national and international levels because of mismatches between levels of control relative to levels of harm and because of disagreement about the relative levels of harm. This is likely to lead to continuing debate about the appropriate levels of controls for alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. If recreational drugs are ranked against scales of harm in recent research reviews, tobacco and alcohol are regulated lightly at national and international levels compared to other psychoactive substances, while the opposite applies for cannabis.

These anomalies probably cannot be cured quickly. The economic interests behind tobacco and alcohol are very powerful. However, smoking in public places is becoming less acceptable in many parts of the world, and smokers in general will likely be facing further controls. Less harmful products containing nicotine but which are not smoked have the potential to reduce the harm from smoking, but currently face impediments in the market, for instance from EU decisions.

One approach would be to have more local rather than national or international control, to allow local factors such as the exact place in which drugs are being consumed, or the form in which they are used, to be taken into account. One problem with this approach is that both drugs and people are internationally mobile and in some circumstances will gravitate towards places with the lowest level of regulation.

Novel drugs

The choices of substances by drug users tend to be conservative; MDMA is the single example of a substance which has come into wide use in the last three decades. New drugs that might become used despite this could be those which have potential to enhance mental and physical performance. New psychoactive substances might be developed which enhance sexual performance (as with the success of Sildenafil (known as Viagra), or intellectual and cognitive performance. For example, drugs to promote wakefulness or intellectual performance might become more readily available and more commonly used.

Vaccines against drug use may be developed, possibly requiring regular top-up injections. Their use would raise ethical issues. This, and the options for future control of drug use, requires further research.

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