# Harms associated with concurrent alcohol and party drug use amongst young people

## Researcher

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## Summary

Young people today live in what some scholars have defined as a ‘post-modern’ era, characterised by globalisation, the internet, mass media, production and consumption. In post-modern times, there has been a significant increase in western countries in the use of ‘party drugs’, including ecstasy and methamphetamine, among ‘ordinary’ young people in social and leisure-oriented contexts.  Some researchers believe that the use of some illicit drugs have become ‘normalised’ in youth culture, and this use is no longer linked with deviant behaviour.

This thesis explores the concepts of post-modernity and normalisation as they relate to the culture and practices of a group of 25 young people in Melbourne who call themselves the ‘A-Team’.  The A-Team is a social network of youth who considered themselves to be ‘typical’ or ‘mainstream’, who participated in work and study, and who did not engage in any illicit activity other than drug use.

## Outcomes

This thesis describes the multiple ways in which A-Team members attempted to manage their use of alcohol and party drugs within their ‘normal’ surburban lives.  In particular, it highlights the ways in which they engaged with discourses of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ drug use and ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ drug use. It also describes the ways in which they engaged with discourses of moderation and excess, and the desire for both self-control and ‘controlled loss of control’. These discourses arose as a consequence of a range of competing tensions that the A-Team consistently managed.  These tensions included the search for bodily pleasure, identity and the desire for intimate social relationships, experiences of drug-related harm and significant critiques of specific forms of drug use from group members, and from non-drug using friends and family.

Swedish sociologist Sharon Rodner Sznitman has suggested that young drug users engage in practices of ‘assimilative normalisation’ by attempting to manage their ‘deviant’ or stigmatised behaviour, and engage in ‘transformational normalisation’ by attempting to resist or redefine what is considered to be ‘normal’ with respect to illicit drug use and drug users.

This thesis describes how A-Team members engaged in practices of assimilative normalisation by concealing their drug use from disapproving friends and family, severing ties with some non-drug using friends, repeatedly attempting to cease or reduce their drug use, drawing on notions of ‘controlled’ and ‘moderate’ use as the most acceptable form of drug use, and justifying their drug use as a temporary feature of young adulthood.  It also shows how some A-Team members engaged in transformational normalisation by rejecting the need for moderate or controlled forms of consumption, attempting to redefine the boundaries of socially acceptable drug-using behaviour and by offering an alternative reading of ecstasy as a drug that enables the performance of an intoxicated self.

The author argues that theories of post-modernism and normalisation emphasise too strongly macro-level changes and do not adequately appreciate the complexity of social process and the cultural meanings negotiated within and through the practices of individuals and groups. For example, while theories of post-modernity have shed light on the way in which lives are structured at the macro level, they less adequately account for the way that young people continue to make and re-make meaning and identity from enduring social relationships and particular social contexts.

The research shows that there are many competing social and cultural forces that shape the way that young people use drugs and understand their use. It is essential that we develop a greater understanding of young people’s drug use and not interpret their drug use practices through frameworks that rely on macro-level cultural and/or attitudinal shift. Young recreational drug users face a multitude of issues when attempting to manage their drug use amidst the competing demands of relationships, sport, work, finances and career. These issues and the responses by young drug users are likely to vary between groups, between cultures and between types of drug use.

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