

DRUG USE, DRIVING RISKS AND LAW -BREAKING

Perception of driving-linked risks by users of illegal drugs

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Drug-taking while driving is a topical theme. A recent French law (18 June 1999) stipulates that the driver of a vehicle involved in a fatal traffic accident must be subjected to a test to detect "substances or plants classed as drugs".

The present, qualitative study¹, aims at examining the perception of traffic risks by users and abusers of illegal drugs through semi-directive interviews with drug users encountered at the Marmottan hospital and in aid centres, with the help of informal consumer networks and through citizens' groups².

Risk is a historically variable notion. In the absence of any official prevention campaigns, the risks involved in driving under the influence of prohibited psychotropic substances have not been clearly established. While those connected with drinking are well known, the same is not true for any risks possibly linked to the consumption of illegal drugs. Much research has been done on the behaviour of drug abusers, as well as on risk-taking when driving, but rarely are the two approaches crossed...

Medical facts

Since all of these substances are not legally for sale, consumers have no guarantee as to their actual content, and their effects may therefore vary enormously from one dose to another³. Furthermore, the effects of a substance are affected by the user's psychological state at the time as well as by the circumstances surrounding its consumption. Information of a medical nature should therefore be handled within these limits.

Although all illegal drugs do not specifically produce driving incapacitation, researchers do find modified perceptions potentially susceptible of inducing dangerous behaviour depending on the substance and the dose taken. Studies of interactions with other substances including alcohol but also medication and mixtures of illegal drugs are still extremely fragmentary. Further, consumption of drugs covers a wide range of extremely different social situations which definitely affect the extent of risk-taking.

In fact, little is known about the impact of use of psychotropic

substances on traffic accidents in Europe, as pointed out in the White Paper entitled "Road security, illegal and legal drugs and medication"⁴. Some pharmacological findings are available, however, on the effects of several drugs, including cannabis, heroin and cocaine, on the human organism and on interactions between them. The effects studied are wakefulness-sleepiness, inhibition-loss of inhibition, and so on. Weaning-linked effects are also reported.

No reliable quantitative findings are presently available on driving following intake of psychotropic substances. Substance-abusers themselves are usually unaware of the effects of illegal drugs, and do not refer to any established norm for risks, as drinkers sometimes do.

Generally speaking, most drivers do not view safe driving and obeying the traffic code as synonymous: "the good driver views him or herself as sufficiently competent and aware of the dangers of the road to be able to bend the rules to fit the situation"⁵. Risk-taking is commonplace throughout the population, but is connected with different types of representations depending on the kind of socio-economic integration and the social importance of the substances in the person's everyday life.

Such differential representations may also be found within the group studied here. Representations of driving risks depend on the stakes attached to risk-taking. These vary with the person's relationship with the future, conception of health and future prospects, as well as with the substances taken and how consumption is managed.

Some drug abusers seem to seek out driving risks as a sort of trial by ordeal, similar in nature to the ordeal of substance abuse itself, the idea being to test one's own limits to make sure one is entitled to live.

Types of consumption

We chose to study the type of consumption – intensive, regular or occasional use – rather than the substance taken, postulating that perceptions depend on the importance of one or several psychotropic substances in the itinerary of individuals and in their reference groups. What counts here is the place occupied by the substance in the person's social life rather than the substance per se. Most intensive consumers of illegal substances are multiple-substance consumers (always including alcohol and tobacco). In each case we studied the main substance, and included references to findings for other substances taken by the same person. All *intensive* users (daily, intensive use and dependency) took heroin or cocaine, with the exception of one cannabis user. Most had no regular job and had been involved occasionally in criminal activities.

The drug of choice of *regular* consumers (daily, in small amounts, up to 5 joints for cannabis) is cannabis or ecstasy.

¹ This research was done with the help of Martine ATTAL-VALIERE (for the medical aspects), Marie BASTIANELLI (interviews) and Valérie SOARES (written transcription).

² The study lasted 18 months (from June 1997 to January 1999). It covered 14 regular, occasional or intensive (for one person) users of cannabis, intensive takers of heroin (13), cocaine (4) or acid and regular users of amphetamines (3), and 15 attenders of rave parties (predominantly ecstasy consumers). 35 were subjected to semi-directive interviews and 15 were seen in group interviews. A questionnaire containing basic information on the characteristics and habits of ravers was circulated at rave (techno music) parties. It provided additional information on participants in these parties, their consumption of psychotropic substances, use of motor vehicles and how they relate to driving risks.

³ An inventory of medical knowledge on the subject has been established and included in the research report (by Martine ATTAL).

⁴ Co-ordinated by Professor Claude LAGIER, 1995.

⁵ RENOARD (J.M.), How traffic violations are viewed by sentenced drivers, *Penal Issues*, 1997, VIII -5.

Most of these people are employed, the youngest are in training.

Occasional consumers (once a week, once every other week, or when an opportunity arises) are generally cannabis users, and are regularly employed.

The perception of risk and relationship to the law will be analysed for each group, and for each type of substance.

Regular or occasional consumers

People who take cannabis are aware that driving under the influence of that substance may be dangerous. No difference was found between occasional and regular users here.

* Perception of risk

Regular or occasional users of hashish perceive the risks connected with its consumption in terms of modified perception of speed (perceived as twice as great as it really is, making them drive unusually slowly), dulled reflexes and difficulty in identifying red lights.

Greater concentration is required. These people also notice that consumption of hashish produces an elation that makes them less alert. Some report spurts of acute anxiety when on the road (panic, sweating, irrational fear of an accident).

Comparatively, the combination of alcohol and cannabis, causing deep drowsiness which makes driving impossible, is viewed as most dangerous when on the road.

Five cannabis users had changed their consumption habits from intensive to regular or occasional. Gradually, as the substance became less important in structuring their everyday life, they came to view the risks connected with consumption when driving as greater. The perception of these risks depends on the distance taken with regard to the substance. Looking backward, they perceive the risks they ran when they were intensive consumers.

Ecstasy is viewed by users as relatively dangerous and not recommended when driving. Those effects on driving identified by researchers are relativised by users, who feel they depend on the context in which ecstasy is taken, and on techno parties in particular. Contrary to what is reported in some studies, accidents linked with use of ecstasy do not occur around rave parties, and this is corroborated by participants. This depends on the type of consumption and the duration of the rave parties (since there is generally a period of rest before people leave the premises).

* Relations with the law enforcement agencies

Most users think that the police is incapable of detecting substance consumption, and especially hashish or other psychotropic substances, during road checks. They do their utmost to seem to be "clean". The eventual development of detection tests would affect their travelling habits more than their consumption. The pleasure of substance use is greater than the fear of prosecution.

The law does not act as a safeguard. It is perceived as incoherent and a nuisance, and its representatives and their detection work do not have the necessary credibility.

Participants in rave parties view the intervention of police forces during these as dangerous, since the outcome is that drivers who are both stressed and still under the influence of substances rush out onto the road.

Intensive users

Practically all intensive users take heroin or cocaine. No intensive user of ecstasy was found in this group. We encountered a single intensive user of cannabis, whose habits were quite similar to those of the aforementioned. They often consume the substance alone. Their lifestyle is characteristically extremely marginal, but there is no indication of whether this is the cause or the outcome of everyday substance consumption. The main risk reported by these individuals is driving during withdrawal, which causes them to take serious risks (driving on sidewalks, crossing red lights, etc.).

* Perception of risks

Risk-taking when driving is viewed as one of the many risks inherent in their way of life, particularly since driving is a necessity for getting around, and especially for procuring the substances they need. Drivers may fall asleep under the effect of a substance. Several individuals report accidents or near-accidents under these conditions.

Heroin or cocaine gradually totally occupy their minds, producing a lifestyle revolving around consumption, often viewed as presently indispensable to their equilibrium. Some of these individuals regret that their consumption has developed to that point, and the resulting lifestyle, but the number of details mentioned when discussing it are indicative of their ongoing attachment to it.

They oscillate between denying any danger and the detailed description of personal experience with risks experienced when driving. Heroin is their main concern, and this makes it very difficult for them to engage in any rational regulation of risk-taking. There is no perception of the risks entailed by driving under the influence of these substances, especially in individuals who view heroin as a medication. To this way of thinking, withdrawal is an ailment, and the state attained by taking the substance is viewed as normal.

* The scale of risks

Those substances viewed as most dangerous for driving are alcohol and cocaine, owing to the feelings of power and aggressiveness they produce. The risks connected with intensive cocaine consumption are of many types, and are caused by the stop-and-go pattern of life and the feeling of urgency tied to this habit. Consumers do not seem to have any respite, and to be unable to control their behaviour. In fact, consumers of other substances who have driven under the influence of cocaine strongly disavow its use when driving. As for hallucinogens, it is generally agreed that they are incompatible with driving.

* Relations with the law enforcement agencies

Intensive users consider that they run less of a risk of being arrested for that offence than for other illegal acts (such as driving without a license, various offences, violent retaliation...). They rely on their ability to concentrate to get them through police checks by hiding their actual condition. Since they are accustomed to being arrested and taken to court, they tend to view traffic offences as trivial and rely on their techniques for "controlling the situation" in the presence of the police.

Cocaine users do not mention fear of the police or of being arrested, because they are incapable of controlling their con-

sumption to avoid them, and accept them as part of their everyday life, in which procurement is the main concern.

Trial by ordeals

What is described here as trial by ordeals is a type of behaviour in which extreme, life-risking experiences are sought out as a way for individuals to prove to themselves that they are entitled to live. Some intensive consumers speak of confronting oneself, challenging fortune and destiny, and the trials experienced in procuring the desired substance. The same is not true of regular or occasional consumers.

Users of psychoactive drugs do not all seek out risk-taking, or strong emotions, through driving under the influence of some substance. This seems to be the case of a minority of this group.

The most discriminating factor in the perception of the risks involved in driving under the influence of illegal drugs is the type of consumption. Intensive consumers tend to develop a double language, in which their denial of the danger grows in proportion to the grip held on them by substance procuring and use : the fact is that the language is the same, be it that of the intensive user of cannabis or of heroin. At the time of the interview, the itinerary of intensive users had reached a point of very limited socio-economic integration. Their marginality, that had existed previous to drug-taking, takes the form of distancing from the working world, frequent criminal behaviour and great distrust of representatives of any authority. Surprisingly enough, intensive drug users do drive, and their vehicles may be borrowed, purchased at a low price, or conversely, luxury items (in the case of some dealers).

They emphasize perceived risks connected with the intensive use of cocaine, heroin, cannabis or synthetic drugs, but do not spontaneously act accordingly by implementing strategies to reduce those risks. Occasionally they minimise or deny them, after having mentioned them.

The discourse of regular or occasional cannabis users is more down-to-earth, thanks to the concrete experience of family and job constraints, which procures the security and stability of a lifestyle rooted in legal work and more lasting, structured emotional relationships. The consumption of cannabis is very important to these people, who would like to see it decriminalised, so that they may continue their habit openly. Indeed, it is the only major instance of law-breaking in their everyday life, whereas this is not the case for intensive consumers.

Both regular and occasional users of cannabis stress the risks involved in its consumption. Those who had changed their consumption habits because of the place and importance the substance tended to take in their lives differentiate two periods : the period of intensive consumption, in which they did not perceive any difference between the risks involved in driving and their other habitual activities, and the present period of regular or occasional consumption, in which they adopt a pre-consumption strategy so as to avoid driving dangerously. They continue their consumption, but at a much lower level, at specific times and places, and plan for the "post-use" period, which they did not do when they smoked intensively.

Ecstasy users belong to a techno party "micro-culture". Risk prevention develops out of a collective process, with deliberate

initiation of newcomers. The following hypothesis seems to be validated : the less consumption is intensive, the more individuals are able to take some distance from it, to situate substance-taking in a context of conviviality rather than of need, and to devise valid strategies for risk-reduction.

All of the subjects encountered minimise the risk of punishment for breaking the law. Those who are in a perspective of trial by ordeal view their relations with the authorities as well as health problems as so many challenges to meet in their existential search.

Cannabis users do not believe in the action of the law enforcement agencies, since they want a change of law on the question. Since they do not feel they are "criminals" they do not imagine they might be arrested. Most smoke in private, and believe there is no risk of punishment. Since there is no test similar to the Breathalyser, they do not believe the police capable of measuring their consumption, and therefore feel relatively safe.

Intensive heroin and cocaine users are accustomed to being in contact with the police and the justice system for offences, more or less serious, unconnected with driving. They rely on their ability to dissimulate to avoid sanctions that actually remain unclear to them. Driving under the influence of illegal drugs is quite low on their scale of law-breaking, and this makes the risk of being stopped by the police less dramatic.

Ecstasy users who attend rave parties are somewhat familiar with the police, through contact directly connected with the parties, at which illegal drugs circulate. They report negative experiences, which tend to encourage them to persist in their habit.

As a rule, regular or occasional consumers are not opposed to preventive action aimed at potential or actual users of legal and/or illegal substances, and some even favour it. This was in fact one element in their motivation when they accepted to be interviewed. When they pursue the subject further, they state that prevention is useful for people who are beginning to use psychotropic substances, so as to warn them of the danger of uncontrolled use when driving. Some engage in a sort of informal initiation of "beginners", and feel that they themselves are sufficiently informed.

Where they are concerned personally, they feel that they control the situation sufficiently, sometimes by abstinence when driving or by taking doses felt to be minimal and not dangerous. All rely on their own experience and assessment of the risk run. Interestingly, none mention any scientific knowledge on the question. Consumption remains in the realm of pleasure or need, depending on the type of use.

The present research project is the first of its kind in France. The findings show how the silence induced by the illegality of the substances weighs on the possibility of prevention. They point to the lack of impact of prohibitions on consumption, and especially on consumption when driving, and show how difficult it is to implement action aimed at reducing risks, in this context.

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