MAT Medicine Anthropology Theory

SPECIAL SECTION INTRODUCTION

Psychoactive Agents

Drugs, Morality, and Responsibility

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This Special Section explores concepts of morality, responsibility, and agency in relation to psychoactive substances. Such substances have long been seen as especially potent things, ones thought to have the capacity to modify or overcome our own agency, especially in relation to ideas of addiction and intoxication but also ritual and healing. At times such substances even become personified, sometimes as trickster-like characters like John Barleycorn that can trick us into doing things we otherwise would not. Contrastingly, so-called 'smart drugs' like modafinil promise to make us 'more-than-human' through increasing our stamina and ability to focus, and have been taken up avidly by students seeking advantage in exams and coursework. Furthermore, practices such as microdosing psychedelics offer to broaden our horizons of perception and enhance our human capacities for creativity.

These ideas of chemically altered agency and personhood pose questions about the nature of such substances and their markets, including the moral responsibilities of their producers, traders, regulators and consumers (Richert 2019; Valverde 1998). How do we apportion responsibility and blame to an alcoholic compared to the alcohol? Are crimes committed 'under the influence' excusable through lack of *mens rea*? How much blame for societal ills can be placed on substances as varied as khat, sugar, heroin, and cannabis, considering the wider cultural, material and political assemblages in which they are enmeshed? How do notions of alcoholism and substance abuse as a 'disease', inscribed and codified in the category of substance use disorders, rearticulate personal responsibility and shape experience of agency?

These aspects of psychoactive substances speak to broader debates on the 'more-than-human' and how the agency of things challenges conceptions of responsibility and vice versa (Hornborg 2021; Laidlaw 2014). Drugs have curiously

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been rather absent from such debates, despite them being so commonly seen as especially agential and potent things. At the same time, from biographical and materialist approaches to pharmaceuticals (Hardon and Sanabria 2017; van der Geest et al. 1996), to assemblage theory in drug use (Duff 2016; Zigon 2015), and critical medical anthropology studies of addiction (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), agency, potency and responsibility remain relatively ambiguous and at times even interchangeable concepts.

Comprising four original Research Articles, this Special Section aims to contribute to theoretical discussions based on exploration and examination of psychoactive substances as potent and agential things that become focus points for debates about responsibility. It derives from a panel we convened at the 2021 Association of Social Anthropologists conference in St Andrews whose central theme was responsibility. Rather than seeing necessity in working towards some definite schematics of agency and responsibility, we wish to think creatively about how psychoactive substances matter morally, culturally, and politically, and how, through their productive ambiguities, they can help us move beyond simplistic pro and con answers to social issues and policy questions.

Potent things

Before an overview of the contributions, it is important to take a step back to consider how the category ‘drugs’ became such a potent class of things (Carrier and Gezon 2024, 6–7). The word itself comes from a late medieval Dutch term for a ‘dry vat’, *droge vate*, ‘a container for non-perishable goods’ (Breen 2022, 114). This term spread across Europe to encompass a range of non-perishable goods—not just the psychoactive—often used in the medicines of the time. In the 19th century, ‘drug’ grew into its modern usage as a term for both medicines and intoxicants, reflecting the ambiguity of pharmaceuticals such as morphine and cocaine that were used medicinally but also recreationally and came to be seen as having the potential for ‘abuse’ through growing concern about addiction. The 20th century cemented the idea that certain substances are especially dangerous through the internationalisation of drug control. This was achieved by establishing international conventions that came to underpin a global control regime, making prohibition the primary policy applied to drugs. The potency of such drugs was considered so strong that the only way to deal with them was to curtail them as much as possible and push the utopian dream of a ‘drug-free world’. Of course, as this potted history suggests, this generalised understanding of drugs is a relatively recent phenomenon and far from universal. For example, Hugh-Jones’ work (2007) on how such substances are conceived in Amazonia shows how the Western category of ‘drug’ falls far short of doing justice to the intricacies of how people there talk of and relate to these substances.

Thus, notions of drugs as potent and agential things capable of empowering us or leading us into addiction are very much influenced by the recent history of drug development and control. However, this perceived potency is not merely a historical construct. The ability of psychoactive substances to induce mood changes and altered states has been noted throughout history and across different traditions worldwide as the pharmacological actions they possess often do distinguish them from more inert substances. Of course, pharmacologically inert objects are also ascribed potency, as anthropology has shown in its focus on the agency of things, but pharmacological psychoactivity often lends particular weight to things, making them valued and feared (often at the same time) wherever they are found. Thus, there is something 'peculiar', to use the apt word of Andrew Sherratt (2007), about these substances, and they are worth focusing on in relation to anthropological and wider debates about agency, responsibility and morality as we do in this Special Section.

The recent history of drugs has been one of ever-growing scares over increasingly potent new compounds or varieties. Hybrid strains of cannabis often come with increased strength, while synthetic opiates such as fentanyl generate increasing concerns, given their potency is reckoned far stronger than the likes of heroin. Other drugs, meanwhile, are branded as 'soft', although the distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' drugs can be tenuous. Moreover, the recent renewal of focus on the therapeutic benefits of MDMA, LSD, psilocybin, and ketamine—long dismissed after some initial interest in the mid-20th century but now showing promising results for treating trauma, PTSD, alcoholism, and treatment-resistant depression—further complicates the legal, medicinal, and cultural status of these and other drugs. By examining such ambiguous substances, this Special Section invites readers to consider how pharmacological potency is perceived, embodied and managed within individual, societal, cultural, and political frameworks. This comparative approach illuminates the broader mechanisms and pathways through which we encounter substances, revealing common themes of agency, responsibility, and morality.

Our substances also speak to the ambiguities in what can be classified as 'psychoactive'. For instance, sugar, though not typically classified as a 'drug', more commonly as a 'food', has psychoactive and physiological effects that contribute to significant public health issues and concerns. Thinking about sugar as a psychoactive agent and, dare we say, a drug, challenges conventional boundaries of danger and 'point[s] to the porosity between the category of drugs, foods and other substances' (Bevan, this issue). Considering sugar alongside substances like heroin and khat prompts a re-evaluation of how societal norms and regulatory frameworks shape our understanding of addiction, pleasure, health, and responsibility. As demand grows for increased regulation of sugary foods—and

those now labelled as ‘ultra-processed foods’—we see how such foodstuffs generate similar concerns and responses to the likes of tobacco, alcohol and opiates. For some, such foods are like ‘drugs’: items of consumption that give superficial pleasure rather than morally virtuous nutrition for the body and soul.

As we have long found through our respective research into khat, the leaves and stems of *Catha edulis* chewed for their stimulating properties in East Africa, Yemen and elsewhere, relatively weak psychoactive substances can nonetheless be attributed significant power and controversy. Despite its mild pharmacology compared to other stimulants like methamphetamine, khat has been subject to intense scrutiny and regulation. It presents us with a case study of how a substance with limited inherent potency can become a focal point of moral and political debates about responsibility and harm, unravelling the complexities of how its agency is embodied.

In contrast to khat and sugar, heroin represents the harder end of the spectrum of psychoactive substance use. Opiates are pharmacologically potent and highly addictive, with their use often associated with severe health, social, and legal consequences. Yet beyond the conventional views about addiction and despair, examining heroin offers a deeper understanding of ‘the intimate, affective, and at times hazardous relationships’ (Roe, this issue) that can challenge existing notions of agency and responsibility in the context of addictive substance use.

The articles

This range of substances gives rise to articles brimming with ethnographic particularities that touch on themes of agency, responsibility and morality in differing ways, although as we will return to at the end of this introduction, the theme of ambiguity links them all.

Ermansons provides an examination of the UK’s decision to classify khat (*Catha edulis*) as a Class C drug, despite the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs finding no substantial evidence of societal or medical harms. Focusing on the Somali community in north-west London, he argues that the prohibition discourse amplified perceptions of khat’s harmfulness and overshadowed more pressing concerns within the Somali community, such as socioeconomic integration, mental health, and social marginalisation. By framing khat as a harmful substance, the prohibition discourse not only marginalised concerns of the khat consumers but also shifted the responsibility for broader socioeconomic issues onto the drug itself, obscuring the need for comprehensive public health interventions and support systems. The khat prohibition served as a turning point for many in the Somali community, transforming khat from a cultural practice into a marker of social and moral decline. In this context, the concept of ‘jaadkaholics’—a term coined within

the Somali community to describe individuals who used khat extensively—is particularly interesting. This identity marker was highly stigmatising within the community and strongly aligned with Western notions of addiction and alcoholism. However, the self-identification as jaadkaholics most poignantly highlighted the absence of adequate therapeutic and support structures, revealing ongoing misplacement of responsibility and missed opportunities over the years to address khat consumption when and where it was considered harmful by community members and consumers themselves. Ermansons' analysis aligns with the broader themes of this Special Section by questioning how the notion of harm operates within spaces where responsibility and agency are contested and distributed among individuals and substances. What work does the notion of harm do in the context of drug consumption and control? His work invites readers to reconsider the impacts of prohibitionist policies and to explore more nuanced, community-centred approaches to addressing the harms associated with psychoactive substance use.

Roe's article is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with heroin users in Southeast Scotland. It attends to ambiguous notions of agency attributed to and by people who use substances, and to substances themselves. It asks how responsibility for recovery becomes divested onto individuals, and how a moral 'devotion' to one's recovery is mandated by medical and judicial institutions. The article further highlights how dyadic and intimate relationships with heroin are emplaced within wider webs of relations, and how heroin itself is suffused with agency and intentionality: becoming at once a force for destruction and source of life-giving surrender. In all this the concept of consolation is key, a term that conveys how Roe's interlocutors turn to heroin to gain solace for various forms of loss they have experienced. This concept gets to the heart of much of ambiguity in drug use: the likes of heroin can simultaneously bring solace and consolation for existing loss, while also become blamed for bringing about further loss. Roe also discusses the 'wilful surrender' of drug users to the substances they consume. Rather than analysing addiction as a straightforward choice between 'control and compulsion, agency and ensnarement' (Roe, this issue), addictive relationships blur these apparent opposites in tense negotiations. Furthermore, Roe's moving ethnography in former mining towns shows clearly the connection of addiction to the deprivation people in this post-industrial landscape still endure decades after the mines closed.

Bevan's article continues an ethnographic focus on Scotland, this time turning to the ambiguous place of sugar in the lives of Edinburgh schoolchildren. In the UK, high-sugar foods and drinks have been marked out by governmental health bodies as a societal problem, as drivers of ill health to be avoided. Many public health initiatives target children—a group understood to be potentially lacking in agency

and responsibility with regards to consumption, and in need of protection. The article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in schools to explore the meanings and effects attributed to sugar in different spheres of life. These meanings and effects are extremely ambiguous, and Bevan provides a series of ethnographic encounters that highlight parents' and school staff's ambivalence about the public moral 'badness' of sugar and the transgressive pleasures of consuming it. She uses a number of vignettes of life in these schools where sugar came into sharp focus as pupils, teachers and parents negotiated its moral ambiguities, where attempts to teach about responsible diets and the need to be restrained in consuming sugar would be followed by using cakes and other sugary treats as a treat and reward for pupils. Bevan in particular focuses on pleasure in her analysis, demonstrating how it is used to build responsible subjects in situations deeply infused with questions of social class and power relations.

Carrier's article once more focuses on khat, this time in the Kenyan context. He focuses on the 'potent talk' that accompanies khat consumption, talk that, he argues, enhances the potency of what is a relatively weak substance pharmacologically. How drugs affect people and societies is of course highly varied and ambiguous, with many factors coming into play, as conceptualised in the classic formulation of 'drug, set and setting' (Zinberg 1984) that relates drug compounds to the wider psychosocial context of consumption. Carrier explores how anthropological and other social science approaches to drugs seek to distribute agency and moral responsibility away from the drug itself into these contextual factors. While there is much sense in this, the article argues that such a conceptual move should not be seen to diminish the potency of the drug itself but instead to enhance it: for these substances do not just come with potent pharmacologies, but also with potent anthropologies, sociologies and histories that combine and interact in fascinating yet often dangerous ways. The article is based on two decades of research into khat, as well as more recent research into cannabis in East Africa, and explores how people talk about *handas*, the Kenyan term for the khat high. Handas is treated as a trickster-like figure, capable of bringing alertness and sociability, but also taking the consumer over and leading them astray. While handas itself is a fleeting state of being, it can live into the future in the form of the handas stories that people regale to their friends long afterwards.

Ambiguity and the anthropology of drugs

Ambiguity emerges again and again in the articles in this collection, as well as in accounts of drug use more broadly. As the articles in this Special Section show, drug effects are so dependent upon contextual factors—set and setting—that definitive conclusions about intrinsic harmfulness or harmlessness of drugs are difficult to make. Harm or harmlessness is situational and depends upon the

vantage point from where we observe; and a holistic portrayal of drugs and their effects would see responsibility being diffused from the substance itself into the wider context and wider situation. As Zinberg (1984) and others have long observed, even the likes of heroin that so many see as dangerously addictive can be consumed in a controlled fashion given the right context and situation (e.g., diamorphine is a key palliative in healthcare systems), something suggested too by the recent work of American psychologist and neuroscientist Carl Hart, who documents his own controlled use of a range of drugs (Hart 2021). Conversely, relatively weak substances such as khat can be linked to harms depending on context. The earlier anthropology of alcohol and its demonstration of the context-dependence of the effects and harms or otherwise of even strong drinks is another case in point (Heath 1958).

Yet, of course, people tend to view drugs with great moral clarity, holding them responsible for associated harms or for perceived benefits rather than diffusing responsibility into context as a comparative anthropological approach might do. The same goes for their consumers, producers and traders: people find them often easy to blame for society's ills. When viewed through a morally-inflected lens, all the above ambiguity can disappear as wider contextual factors become obscured by the ascribed agency and responsibility of the substance itself. This artificial clarity leads to strong calls for action against drugs and those who would dabble with them. This is the moral clarity that underpinned much of the war on drugs of the 20th century, generating the forcefully simplistic logic that drugs are bad and responsible for all manner of ills. Such logic has perhaps proved even more potent than drugs themselves, changing the way we see substances designated as drugs and those who consume them, and even changing the course of history as governments and others took up the vain challenge of ridding the world of them, prompting critical rephrasing of the war on drugs as a war on people.

Given how anthropological perspectives such as those in this collection highlight the complexities and ambiguities in relation to drugs, what impact can these perspectives have on how drug consumption is seen and treated in wider society? Moral certitude about drugs has prompted much action, but what action might ambiguity call forth? Focusing on the drug itself—as so much 'war on drugs' policy does—suggests superficially easy courses of action, whereas acknowledging that responsibility for harms associated with drugs rests in much wider contexts generates no easy policy options. However, given that so much harm has come from the artificial certainties of the war on drugs, perhaps anthropological and other voices can play a key role in tempering such moral certainty through highlighting human-drug relationships in all their complexity. Perhaps they can also defuse the power of these psychoactive agents that are rarely fully responsible for either the harms or the benefits with which they are associated.

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