“ChemSex in the sauna”: An ethnographic study on the use of drugs in a gay sex venue in Barcelona

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Warning (Sep-2014): Initiation of using Crystal Meth in España among gay men.
Study objectives

• To describe the use of drugs among customers of a gay sauna in Barcelona.

• To identify and select potential participants to be included in the qualitative study.
Research design

• Formative research
• Qualitative research of ethnographic approach.
ETHNOGRAPHY

• It studies the structure and cultural patterns of functioning of a particular group (their interpersonal behaviors, beliefs, customs, etc.) and not a single person.
Response

With both eyes open: notes on a disciplinary dialogue between ethnographic and epidemiological research among injection drug users

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose problems and the application and potential contributions of multidisciplinary drug research to the ethnographic methodology. I have made ethnography by examining the work of others, including The Rosenfeld, I (Fiddler, 1967); Graph of Use (Walsh, 1981); Wheel of Upper Level (Fleming, 1982). I have not been invisible but unnoticed, Watson. You did not know where to look, and so you missed all that is important.

The world is full of obvious things, which nobody by any chance ever observes.

Sherlock Holmes

Our fictional hero points out the obvious to us: it is disciplined observation that finds the crucial fact, the missing piece of the puzzle. The point in case here is whose observation? Which discipline? The debate over whether epidemiology or ethnography is better suited to study the hidden worlds of socially marginalised injection drug use.

Clinician as epidemiologist as ethnographer

My perspective is that of a new drug use researcher, which is not to say that I am a young researcher in that I was a practicing physician for 10 years prior to entering academia. My clinical experience was, and still is, predominately with socially marginalised urban populations, specifically focusing on the homeless and drug users. Upon entry into academia, several years ago, I first pursued formal training in epidemiology followed by extracurricular education and informal guidance in the theory and practice of ethnography. I combine these gaze—clinical, quantitative and ethnographic—to peer into the world of embodied social suffering and to deeply examine differential access to medical care. This tripartite awareness also allows me to investigate certain macro-level quandaries of injection drug use.
Field work

• Visits: once or twice per week (a fixed visit on the weekend)
• 6-8 hours on the venue per visit.
• Visits at different times (morning, afternoon, night and late at night).
• Other 2 saunas were visited to contrast my observations.
Data collection methods

• Hidden participant observation (partial): participant as an observer.
• Informal interviews (thus, persons do not feel being studied and, therefore, it does not affect their behavior).
• Study of other sources.
Lo que es la sauna esta muy bien, a parte de los camellos que pueden haber dentro y de algun que otro chapero, pero encima que se fume ya es demencial y no precisamente dos o tres personas, sino que ya es un hábito muy frecuente y repetitivo, conté mas de 20 personas fumando, eso por los pasillos, así que imagina dentro de las cabinas, donde ya está totalmente descontrolado. Está un poco dejada en ese aspecto y si continuan así, dejaré de ir.

Freakum freak
Hace 3 meses
★★★★★ Payé 25 euros l’entrée lors du festival de Barcelone, je suis resté 5 minutes !
Etablissement déplorable, très très sale !!! J’ai l’habitude de faire les saunas et celui ci est honteux pour la ville de Barcelone ! Je vous le déconseille ...

Más

donoban arango
Hace 4 meses
★★★★★ Son un poco represivos con el cliente. Además de que hay mas camellos en la propia sauna que en las casitas baratas. Ya podrian cambiás esas toallas que pusieron que ni secan y hacen nada. Se muere uno de frío.
What it was observed?

- Type of drugs used
- How those drugs are used (pattern, administration routes, context, situations).
- User profile (e.g. age, education, occupation, etc.).
- Language.
- Relationships among drug users.
- The sauna owner’s attitude.
Procedure

• I went to the sauna as a customer more.
• To identify where drugs are sold, exchange and consumption; and observe/listen.
• To get close to customers who were alone and get to talk to them.
• To those customers identified as potential participants, I revealed the purpose of my presence in the sauna and gave explanation of the study.
• Field notes using mobile telephone
Data collected from:

- Customers
- Sauna employees
- Dealers
Validation

• Testimonial validity
Results
Content

- Sauna description
- Function and meaning of the sauna
  - The dealers
- Drugs and its meaning
  - The consumers
- Consumption risks
- Sauna attitude: discourses vs. practices
Study venue: Sauna XXL

• It is centrally located.
• Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
• Pass cards.
• Large private rooms can be rented by the hour.
The sauna: function and meaning

• Perception of being the best gay sauna in Barcelona.
• 60%-70% customers are mostly men aged over 30
• The sauna is a living space.
• The sauna is not only a venue for sex, but also functions as social space.
• But for some customers it is a "space for consumption."
Drugs and its consumption

- GHB, cocaine, ecstasy/silver bars, ketamine, poppers and viagra are mostly used. Tina is increasing. Few mephedrone.
- Consumption occurs in the bathrooms, in the cabins. Also in the hallways or in the lockers.
- Evidence of consumption: packaging, rollers, drug residues
- Evidence of consumption: men on very high.
- “Chillouts” can be organized in the large private rooms.
- Drugs as a symbolic value: having drugs is having power.
- Evidence of slamming.
The consumers

• Drug users are often present from late at night (starting from 23h) to dawn, representing about 60-70% of their total clientele.

• Some of them are also frequenters of private sex parties (last party: the sauna).

• Many men are poly-drug users.

• They usually accept any drug that is offered.

• Some consumers may spend several days in the sauna.

• During interactions with consumers, some acknowledged having mental health problems.

• Many drug users are unemployed.
Consumption risks

• To accept drugs from others without knowing exactly what they are.
• Episodes of GHB overdose ("chungos").
• Theft (locker key).
• Sexual assault (legal considerations?)
• Death
• Condomless sex (also "accidents").
• On long time of consumption: paranoia.
• Indicator of dependence/addiction: longer stays being associated with uncontrolled drug use.
Sauna’s attitude toward the consumption

• Formal policy prohibiting drug use.
Conclusions

• The results are only valid for the sauna studied.
• Drug users visiting the sauna at key times.
• Permissiveness in the use of drugs in the sauna reflects broader attitudes of permissiveness within gay culture.
• This study reveals several important gaps in prevention: little information, no focused interventions, a lack of services for drug users and specific mental health services.
Prevention

General:

• Information.
• Risk reduction approach.
• Specific services for drug users (for LGTB population)
• Training for personnel in substance abuse centers and socio-health services about sex-and-drugs.
• Interventions should include aspects related to mental health.
Prevention

Specific:
• To involve and engage the owners of the sex venues to tackle problematic drug consumption
• Peer educators.
• Training for sauna employees as educators.
• Elaboration of a protocol in case of “chungos” or overdoses.
• Control of the days of stay inside the sauna?
Thank you!