

# Evidence in European social drug research and drug policy

Aileen O’Gorman, Gary R. Potter & Jane Fountain (Eds.)



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# Acknowledgements

The European Society for Social Drug Research (ESSD) was established in 1990. Its principal aim is to promote social science approaches to drug research, with special reference to the situation in Europe. Organising annual conferences and producing an annual book are core activities of the ESSD. For this year's book, participants who presented their research at the 26<sup>th</sup> annual conference at the University of the West of Scotland in September 2015, and members of the ESSD, were invited to submit a chapter outline on the theme of evidence, research, and policy. After a first review of these outlines by the editorial team, a selection of authors were invited to submit papers which were then peer reviewed by distinguished scholars in the field. This book contains only the chapters that were approved during this process.

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*Editors: Aileen O’Gorman, Gary R. Potter & Jane Fountain*





# Editors

*Aileen O’Gorman* is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Drug and Alcohol Studies at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and organiser of the ESSD annual conference 2015. Her research explores the dynamics of drug use and drug markets in marginalised communities, and the lived experience of drug-related and policy-related harms. She is intrigued by the problematisation of illicit drug use and illicit drug users, and the social construction of drug policy; and by the absence of women’s voices in drugs research and drugs policy. She focuses on research that is participative, engages with the communities affected, and has an impact on policy and practice. Her most recent work includes ‘Chillin, buzzin, getting mangled, and coming down: doing differentiated normalisation in risk environments’, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 2016; and a commissioned research report: Outcomes: drug harms, policy harms, poverty and inequality.

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# 1

## Evidence in European social drug research and drug policy: an introduction

Aileen O’Gorman

### 1. Evidence as a metaphor

In 1990, the European Society for Social Drug Research (ESSD) was founded as a platform for social science drugs research and a counterpoint to the then dominant medical and therapeutic epistemologies of addiction science (Decorte & Korf, 2004). Since then, the ESSD has supported – through its annual conferences and publications – a diverse range of drug research approaches with a particular focus on studies from qualitative and ethnographic traditions, and interpretivist paradigms.

During the ESSD 2015 conference in Scotland, the theme of evidence permeated through many of the presentations and conversations and was nominated by the participants as the topic for the ensuing annual ESSD publication. The subject choice – a concept rooted in positivist epistemologies – may seem somewhat at odds with the qualitative tendencies of the ESSD. However, the selection reflects its current topicality and the extent to which social science researchers are now required to engage with knowledge as evidence, and with evidence-based policy.

Evidence as a metaphor for knowledge characterised by the positivist traits of objectivity, validity, and value-free truths is a contested commodity within the social science community. Debates include Becker’s (1967) assertion that all knowledge is political, and cultural and feminist critiques of ‘malestream’, identity-blind social science (e.g., Oakley, 1972; Gilroy, 1993). In the field of drugs research, critical discussions on the social construction of evidence and its interpretation through a lens clouded by values and ideology are ongoing (e.g., MacGregor, Singleton & Trautmann 2014; Monaghan, 2010; Stevens, 2011; Stevens & Ritter, 2013). Nonetheless, the demand for evidence to inform policy and practice continues to grow exponentially. MacGregor (2013) traces this development to neo-liberal public sector management concerns with ra-

tional policy choices based on effectiveness of ‘what works’ and its value for money. In turn, research funders have increasingly prioritised studies that have a demonstrable input into, or impact on, policy.

In this book, authors from across Europe contribute to these debates on evidence. They illustrate the complex contexts in which evidence is produced and interpreted in the drugs field and challenge the positioning of evidence as a neutral product of an apolitical process.

## 2. The politics of evidence construction

In 2006, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2007) launched a report on ‘Sweden’s successful drug policy: a review of the evidence’. At the time, the report received notable attention in international drug policy circles for its claim that Sweden’s prohibitionist drug policy resulted in lower rates of drug use than in European countries with more liberal drug policy regimes. In a critically acclaimed response to the UNODC report, entitled: ‘Looking at the UN, smelling a rat’ (Cohen, 2006), *Peter Cohen*, the then Director of the Centre for Drugs Research (CEDRO) at the University of Amsterdam, demonstrated how a body of evidence was selectively and erroneously constructed to promote the value of prohibitionist drug policies. It is fitting, ten years later, that this book opens with an updated version of Cohen’s paper (Chapter 2) to act as a timely reminder of the ongoing need for the critique of so-called reason in drug policymaking.

As Cohen adroitly illustrates, the data used to substantiate UNODC’s claim (that a hard-line drug policy resulted in lower rates of drug use) reeked of inconsistencies. The definition of the problem being measured varied widely from drug use to drug abuse and the report selectively (mis)used prevalence data of variable quality, including some dubious comparisons across drug types and age cohorts, with little regard for context, urban/rural, or national differences. Despite the shakiness of its evidence base, however, UNODC inferred from its analysis that countries with lax drug policies ‘have the drug problem they deserve’ (UNODC, 2007, p. 5).

Cohen highlights how the lack of scientific, standardised and theoretically grounded evidence continues to challenge the accurate reporting of drug use, and contends that with such a knowledge vacuum seemingly valid evidence can be produced to support and legitimate prohibitionist agendas despite the known inadequacy of such drug policies.

Issues raised by Cohen continue to be relevant and echo throughout the remaining chapters of this book.

### 3. The politics of evidence-based policy

In the decade since Cohen's original paper was written, evidence-based policy (EBP) has become widely promoted as *the* hallmark of good policymaking. Though the term suggests that the evidence selected to inform policymaking is objective and methodologically rigorous, *Adam Standing's* insightful analysis (Chapter 3) demonstrates how evidence for policy is selected also for its ability to support, justify, and legitimise a particular discursive argument within the policy process. In addition, as Cohen had cautioned a decade earlier, EBP provides government and law enforcement agencies – and others that Cohen refers to as the 'shareholders of the drugs industry' – with the opportunity to frame drug problems in ways that increase their resources and power base.

Indeed, Standing views EBP as a 'tactic of depoliticisation' which obfuscates the political nature of policymaking and, consequently, is a highly political strategy. As a case in point, he assesses the functions of the EMCDDA vis-à-vis its affirmed role in the collection and dissemination of objective, reliable, comparable, drug-related (epidemiological) data.

By characterising its approach as one where 'evidence takes priority over ideology' (EMCDDA, 2010a, p. 13), the EMCDDA seems to distance itself from political concerns. However, Standing argues that the absence of an explicit political mandate does not remove the EMCDDA from politics. Rather, its role as a knowledge broker is intrinsically political in the sense that it fosters 'a culture of uniformity' regarding problem definition and the types of data used to support this (Elvins, 2003, p. 121), a role Cohen likened to that of an accountant's 'bookkeeping of national data'. Nonetheless, Standing contends that the EMCDDA's self-presentation as an organisation imbued with the logic of instrumental rationality was fundamental to the promotion of evidence-based drug policies throughout Europe.

### 4. Exclusion of dissenting voices

Standing's analysis of EBP goes beyond a material understanding of evidence. Drawing on Foucauldian ideas on the power of discursive practices to establish orders of (drug) truths (Foucault, 1980), he illustrates how specific forms of policy-relevant knowledge, and consequently specific policy actors and policy frames, are legitimated, validated, and privileged over actors who either cannot speak in such evidentiary terms, or have dissenting views.

*Mats Ekenhdal* and *Patrik Karlsson's* chapter focuses on these latter actors, and draws on similar Foucauldian concepts, to analyse the influence of drug users' views in the development of contemporary Swedish drug policy (Chapter 4). Their illustrative case study demonstrates how evidence is used to bolster discursive practices that ostensibly include other voices but do so

under discursive conditions that minimise the space for critical dissenting views.

Ekdahl and Karlsson trace how drug users’ views on opioid substitution therapy (OST), from their own earlier research, were selectively interpreted, adopted, and adapted in developing new OST regulations. They contend that the Swedish prohibitionist drug policy paradigm framed the extent of user influence on OST policy development. Discussions were based on the premise that all users wished to be in treatment and shed their drug-user identity. Furthermore, drug users’ views were permitted only on a narrow range of neo-liberal managerialist concerns regarding treatment effectiveness, medical safety, and satisfaction with services. Users’ views about the politico-ideological context of OST (such as its role as a control apparatus in treatment regulatory technology – see, e.g., Fraser & valentine, 2008; Keane, 2009) were neither solicited nor heard, nor were views that contradicted the dominant abstinence model such as the users’ wish for services to accept their ongoing drug use in addition to their OST prescription. In this sense, the authors argue that user involvement in policymaking is more a rhetorical device than a practiced reality.

## 5. Evidence in the online world

The epistemological assumptions of online evidence is the subject of the authors’ scrutiny in Chapter 5. Here, *Dave Boothroyd* and *Sarah Lewis* suggest that there is a need for new and different ways of thinking about the nature of the data produced in the contexts of digital communicative exchange. They query whether traditional methodologies are adequate to investigate the novel kinds of phenomena found in online life and note the ontological and epistemological challenges presented by researching the ‘wired world’.

In the case of drugs research, they contend that it is not simply that the internet facilitates access to already existing drug cultures, but that the internet enables new kinds of drug cultural phenomena and new manifestations of drug culture(s) (e.g., Wouters & Fountain, 2015).

Boothroyd and Lewis note that the online world, though commonly referred to as virtual, is nonetheless very real, with many diverse aspects of everyday life now lived in it. Consequently, the distinction research studies make between the online and offline worlds, widely viewed as ontologically discrete milieus, is something to be critically considered in the context of researching online drug culture. Online life, they maintain, is not simply equivalent to online content. They query the ontological premise for online research and to whom, or what, agency could be ascribed – the individuals who contribute and post, and/or the setting/the scene itself. They contend that these issues add a new dimension to the question of how evidence is to be distinguished (if it can be at all) from what it is held to be evidence of. In addition, they suggest that our very understanding