

Drug use and professional life

Exploratory research, Astrid Fontaine, OFDT, July 2002

The use of illicit psychotropic drugs by people integrated into a business environment constitutes a very recent field of research in France. A few studies have been carried out abroad. The Anglo-Saxon countries, Switzerland and the Netherlands have recently explored this subject. The principal works on the use of illicit psychotropic drugs by persons integrated into a business environment deal with the methodological difficulties ranging from accessibility to these so-called “hidden” populations to the construction of the samples and their representativeness.

The research we have carried out focuses on 41 people, aged from 24 to 49¹, who have been carrying on a business activity for more than a year and who use illicit substances other than cannabis at least 10 times per year. We have a qualitative approach which favours the experience and comments of the individuals. The angle of analysis consisted of exploring the interweaving of the private practice represented by the use of illicit substances and the fact of belonging to a business environment. This position implies that these people succeed in managing the use of illicit substances while maintaining their status and their social image, without resorting to specialised structures or institutions and without exposing themselves to the legal penalties that accompany their practice. How do they do this? How do they reconcile the fact of being regarded both as someone who works and possibly assumes responsibilities and as a deviant element in society?

We will first try to explain the motivations most commonly expressed in the interviews, the effects sought by the users in taking psychotropic drugs and some of the problems linked to them leading a double social life. Then we will set out the various logics of drug use in relation to business activity, before tackling the social dimension within the business environment and the strategies for individually managing this situation.

1. Effects sought and meaning given to the drug use

Through the testimonies gathered, there emerge several types of effects sought by users who work, as well as some problems inherent in their particular position. These effects are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but occupy a variable place depending on the individual, the phases of use and the situations they are going through. Moreover, it is rare for a product to be used with the exclusive aim of treating oneself, of celebrating and being sociable or even of increasing one's work capabilities.

“Unwinding”. Many users speak of their use as a relaxation practice/technique, for calming the psychological tensions they feel. For some, using the products is part of managing an excess of energy which is perceived as disturbing and possibly harmful or pressure which at times is too great, or is simply a means of “having a breather” at the end of a day's work. This use may be likened to that of a large section of the working population which has a moderate alcohol use. For others, this aspect of taking psychotropic drugs meets a need to face up to difficulties of a social and/or psychological nature, an initiative which is comparable to a

¹ The average age is 35.

genuine attempt at *self-management of one's mental health*. This choice emerges in part from the desire to “come through it alone”, from the sometimes negative connotation of *introspection* in a formal context but also of a certain distrust towards the medical establishment and prescriptions of medications. These two types of use are commonly defined by the users as a *comfort use* and a *therapeutic use*. Even if they prove practical for pinpointing a certain function of the products, one can well understand the ambiguity of these two expressions and the difficulty they raise, namely: at what point, based on what criteria can one talk of *comfort* or *therapy*?

“Whistle while you work”. Overall, two tendencies can be defined (with all the nuances they imply, particularly the changes in practices during the course of one's life), either when taking products is reserved for free, private time, dissociated from the business world, or when taking products is part of the work context, as a support, a tool.

In the first instance, taking the product never (or only on very exceptional occasions) occurs during work time, but frequently *just after* a working day or² or week³.

In the second instance, it is the euphoric sensation, which has to remain subtle and relatively internalised, which is sought in particular. It is a question of *enjoying oneself while working*, of finding a way of being enthusiastic *in spite of everything* and *because it's necessary*, even if it means deluding oneself voluntarily by modifying one's state of consciousness and by playing with the distancing effects and the changes in the perceptions of time, and the soothing and/or stimulating effects of the products. For the majority of the people we met who use drugs in the context of their work, taking psychotropic drugs is a means of “tolerating work better”, “tolerating others better”, “killing boredom”, or “not watching time go by”. It is a question of disrupting one's perceptions voluntarily in order to do more, but not necessarily better, work, by stifling agitation or irritability which may considerably affect business relationships. In fact, the use of the substances often occurs to combat fatigue, boredom, ill humour and demotivation, which are the worst enemies of work.

“Living a double life”. Using psychotropic drugs in a society which forbids them means laying oneself open to social, official or widespread sanction. To avoid this, the user is almost always constrained to keep his practice secret outside his close circle of friends, and to use products away from the gaze of other people. Living with a secret or leading a double life can give the feeling of living more intensely, of having something that others do not have. Added to the symbolic and social function of the secret is a pragmatic and concrete dimension directly related to the effects sought when taking products: using them means being integrated into a network of users which offers firstly the possibility of obtaining the products. This context of use also allows, and this is an important point, a social existence to be built up outside the business context. Finally and above all, the products again act as stimulants, providing a surplus of energy without which it is sometimes impossible to take on work time, rest time and time for oneself. Giving time to one's life outside work is often perceived by the employer as a sign of good social health and personal stability.

2. Working under the influence.

We have identified three logics of drug use depending on the usage habits in the workplace:

1. The use takes place exclusively in a private context.

For these users, the use falls within a party, collective and/or solitary context. Even though almost all of them have, during their career, experienced one or more episodes of use at work,

² Cannabis for example, is very frequently used with the aim of “unwinding” after work.

³ The “other substances”, whose effects are longer and more intense, are mostly used at weekends and during the holidays.

these experiences remain of an exceptional, anecdotal nature and none of them care to repeat them. This group involves 12 people, namely 7 men out of 34 and 5 women out of 7. Even women are under-represented in our sample, it is interesting to note that 5 of them never use drugs in their workplace and that finally two of them permit themselves to do so very rarely and in all cases positively seek to avoid this situation.

2. The use occasionally happens in the workplace

The use may occur in the workplace but is avoided. Eight people (including 2 women) permit themselves to use drugs in their workplace from time to time. These occasional episodes are usually controlled, the quantities absorbed are limited and the usage times are chosen in such a way that the alteration to their consciousness has as few consequences as possible on their work. *All the same*, the use of psychotropic drugs often takes place when time permits (weekend, quiet period at work), and also “when there’s some left over” after a weekend.

The user does not instigate the opportunity but has no hesitation in seizing it. Four men have experienced episodes of use at the workplace, nearly always in the context of group use, intensively during periods of 1 to 3 months for three of them, and in a more moderated fashion but over a period of a year for one of them. These episodes are recurrent in the paths they take, and seem to them to leave “good memories” even if it is undesirable in their view to operate in this way for too long. They give the impression of seizing the opportunity with pleasure and “taking advantage of it”, while not fearing any potential outbursts or loss of control. We can also emphasise that the product which accompanies the vast majority of the experiences they relate happens to be cocaine.

3. The use is or has been regular, in both their private life and their business context.

The users currently use drugs both at work and elsewhere. This situation has been experienced by 7 people, of whom 2 are dependent on heroin and one uses MDMA in powder form and ecstasy tablets on an almost daily basis. For 4 of them, this use is linked to periods of intensive work (possibly requiring them to be at work for 24 hours at a stretch) and to mixing in nightlife circles (event production, management of a concert hall, etc.). Two of them mention the role of the company and their colleagues as an important aid in managing their use which they acknowledge as being difficult sometimes.

Users who have experienced periods of daily and regular use within the work context for more than a year. Nine men have been through the phase described previously before reducing their use and limiting it primarily to a private context, following a job loss for one of them, and after coming out of heroin dependence for three other people. For the 5 others, stopping this type of use is done without external constraints.

A general tendency consists therefore of making a clear separation between work times and times for using psychoactive products, for several reasons, including:

- Performing professional duties appears to be incompatible with the effects caused by the psychotropic products (activities requiring concentration and precision in particular, or involving significant responsibility).
- The pleasure linked to the job itself suffers (jobs that favour personal expression in particular) or else the job is sufficiently gratifying for the user to devote himself to it completely.
- The duties and/or the rank within the business environment require a presentation effort (within the context of customer contact or team management, for example).
- Whatever the conditions, the user does not contemplate using drugs at his workplace because his reference context or his value system do not permit it.

3. Social dimension of using drugs within a business environment.

In workplaces where in general the average age is relatively low (25 to 35), the use of cannabis is generally described as common and integrated, while it is sometimes tolerated in other types of more conventional organisations. The use of other substances remains clearly more confined everywhere. Finally, depending on the products and the image they convey socially, the use is admitted (this is the case for cannabis) or totally hidden (this is the case for heroin, with no group use of this product in the workplace being recounted to us). Customers and people outside the organisation are systematically and without exception kept out of these prohibited practices, even if it turns out that some of them also use prohibited products. The use of psychotropic drugs is practically always hidden from superiors. It does happen however that the degree of proximity between the employees and their managers is important⁴. In this case, the practice can then be admitted, or even shared in practice. Conversely, when the user holds a position with responsibilities, or when he manages or supervises a team within an organisation where use is not tolerated, it is extremely perilous for him to admit his practice or to be caught out. On the one hand he risks being exposed, losing a profitable job and possibly wrecking his career, and on the other, on account of his position, he is obliged to “show an example” and cannot permit himself to support infringements of the law and the regulations in force in the company.

4. Cannabis and cocaine, the integration products.

Two substances appear to be used most commonly by users who work: cannabis to unwind, and cocaine to stay alert and in particular to maintain a good image in the eyes of other people.

Cannabis. Those who use cannabis exclusively are not represented here. At the time of the interview, 28 people were using it on a daily basis (to varying degrees of intensity⁵), 7 of whom mentioned spontaneously and insistently a “therapeutic” use of this substance. Six regularly smoked cannabis, on a weekly or monthly basis. Six never smoked it or only on very exceptional occasions: for 3 of them, cannabis seems to act as an anxiogenic, projecting them into a state they describe as “paranoid” or agonising each time they take it. Some of them also complain of the amotivational effects of cannabis and seem insensitive to other reputedly positive or pleasant effects.

Seven people describe their use as “therapeutic”. Some even talk of “dependence”. The intensive use of cannabis over a long period of time is often described as a lesser evil by the users who, by smoking joints, satisfy a need, which to varying degrees is easy to regulate, to withdraw from the work by altering their state of consciousness. These users think that in the absence of cannabis, this need would probably be satisfied through the use of other products which prove more complicated to manage (alcohol, heroin).

Cocaine. All the people we met have tried it. 14 have had sustained periods of cocaine use⁶ which lasted 2 to 3 months for 7 of them and 2 to 3 years for 7 others. At the time of the interview, 11 people were using it regularly on a more or less weekly basis, 2 had decided to “take a break” after a long period of regular use, 23 people were using it occasionally⁷ and finally 5 people were no longer using it.

Legendary performance. According to these testimonies, cocaine is only really effective in certain types of jobs: physical and logistical work, and sometimes creative work (but this

⁴ In terms of age, personal affinities, centres of interest, activities outside work, etc.

⁵ From 2 joints in the evening upon returning from work during the week, to 10 per day, including at work.

⁶ Ranging from weekly-monthly to daily.

⁷ With a frequency somewhere between annually and monthly.

point is qualified by a plastic artist). The majority of users explain that rather than a genuine increase in capabilities, it involves the illusion of being efficient or more efficient than usual. Comments along the lines of “I had the impression of doing better work or more work” are recurrent. Cocaine appears to be the drug of performance in the minds of the users and the non-users, whereas in reality it seems to correspond instead to the *drug with the image of performance*. For many people, the aim of using cocaine is to stay alert and also to improve one’s image rather than to increase one’s intellectual or physical capabilities. The effects of cocaine are not only difficult for people outside to spot, they are also deceptive in the positive sense of the word. The majority of the people we met spoke of a product which “gets you going again”, which makes you “look fresh”, “clear-headed”, “alert”. Its use is particularly appreciated the morning after a sleepless night; one of them even using the term “cleaner”. In other words, the cocaine user often appears to be a lively, energetic and healthy person.

5. Management strategies encountered most frequently.

The people we met seem to have spontaneously developed a good knowledge of the products and their reactions. They take into account in their usage choices (in terms of frequency, timing and product type) their individual sensitivity⁸, and their experience in the field of altered states of consciousness means that most of them are able to hold their own and retain a stability necessary to both internal life and life in society. Naturally, some users manage this situation better than others. It must also be stressed that the individual paths of drug use are made up of cycles and periods during which the intensity and regularity of drug-taking, and also the contexts and sometimes the types of products, may vary. Several management strategies were described in the interviews. The most common involved controlling their relationship with the product(s), planning rest periods and paying attention to their body and the way they present themselves.

Conclusion

A general tendency consists of dissociating use time from work time. The legal risk and the fear of stigmatisation mean that in all the workplaces overt use remains poorly perceived and still hidden from people outside. It is also noticed that it is the non-control of the relationship with the product(s) which is penalised most of all, as soon as the addictive behaviour is perceived by other people. In fact, it can happen that a regular use of products such as cocaine or heroin, if kept secret, may paradoxically contribute to maintaining an apparent *normality*.

These testimonies do not provide any information for estimating the prevalence of the use of illicit psychotropic drugs in a business context, but all the same the surveys on these uses in the general population give an indication that this situation concerns only a small section of the working population⁹. Licit psychotropic drugs on the other hand are among the substances most commonly used in this context.

The information we have available concerning the differences in behaviour as regards licit and illicit psychotropic drugs shows the importance of the symbolic relationships the user has with the products. Thus, products whose effects may be similar will have a different attraction or different consequences according to whether they are regarded as “medicines” or “drugs”.

⁸ Problem often absent among adolescents and in the context of collective emulations encountered in a party environment.

⁹ Aged 15 to 75, only 1 to 2% of people say that they have used illicit products (LSD, amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin) at least once in their life. BECK (F.), LEGLEYE (S.), PERETTI-WATEL (P.), *Drogues illicites: pratiques et attitudes* [Illicit drugs: practices and attitudes], in GUILBERT (P.), BAUDIER (F.), GAUTIER (A.) (dir), *Baromètre Santé 2000* [Health barometer 2000], ed. CFES, 4th quarter 2001, pp 237-274

Methodological context

This exploratory qualitative research was carried out within the context of the OFDT TREND device. It is based on 41 semi-directive interviews transcribed in full. Its objective was to bring out lines of research on a misunderstood subject, namely drug use by people with an occupation. The inclusion criteria were broad: “to have been working for more than a year and to use illicit substances other than cannabis at least 10 times per year”. The majority of people were met in public places or were introduced to us by someone from their close circle, who may or may not have been a user. The anonymisation and revision work was carried out under the direction of the interviewees or with their agreement.

Several factors need to be taken into account in the way in which we constructed our sample: the aforementioned inclusion criteria, drawn up from the few existing publications on the subject; the method of contact with the individuals (having several interviewers dispersed geographically meant that we could meet people from totally different networks); and finally the needs of the sponsor. Initially, two business categories had been set, “show business” and “computers”. It was quickly judged necessary to broaden the sample to people carrying on an occupation in other professional fields. Reading the interviews leads to similarities being observed in terms of managing drug use in relation to the pace and conditions of work rather than from the perspective of the business categories.

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