

Harm Reduction in Process: The ACON Rovers, GHB, and the Art of Paying Attention

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Abstract

In recent work on environmental and health risks, Isabelle Stengers has suggested that governing logics have been seized by a strange injunction: “the right not to pay attention.” She characterizes “paying attention” as an art that brings into play connections we are in the habit of keeping separate. In this article, we use this insight to characterize different forms of prevention in the drugs field, arguing that “modes of attention” are an important consideration for harm reduction and counterpublic health. Our case study centers on the ACON Rovers, a team of volunteers who rove around gay dance events on the lookout for people in trouble. Through certain “arts of interception” and through an immanent practice of working with possibilities, the Rovers aim to avert certain dangers, especially those associated with use of the drug gamma-hydroxybutyric acid. But doing this work well involves a certain mode of attending to risk, derived from embodied knowledge, that has regard to the affective relations of surveillance. In this article, we seek to describe and theorize the work of the ACON Rovers. We discuss the historical emergence of the program, the forms of knowledge it draws upon and mobilizes, the attention the project pays to affective relations between different actors in the party environment, and the mechanisms the project has installed to assess and reflect upon its work. Since they seek to intervene in drug effects, we argue that the Rovers are engaged in ontological work. Their mode of operation can be contrasted with that of drug enforcement, which often assumes “the right not to pay attention.”

Keywords

harm reduction, party drugs, LGBTQ culture and politics, cultural studies, science and technology studies, embodiment

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[T]he instability of the pharmakon has been used again and again to condemn it . . . [but this] allows the question of the appropriate attention, the learning of doses and the manner of preparation, to be done away with. (Stengers, 2015, p. 100)

γ -Hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) and γ -butyrolactone are defined in the technical literature as central nervous system depressants that can produce feelings of euphoria, enhanced sensuality, and arousal and excitation. The drugs (grouped together here as “G”) are associated with some neurotoxicity, and negative effects reported include vomiting, respiratory depression, loss of consciousness, cardiac arrest, and death in some instances. These risks are exacerbated when the substance is taken in higher doses or with alcohol or other depressants. While historically G has been used by different groups for a variety of purposes, from industrial applications to part of bodybuilding regimes, the substance has become popular internationally on the dance and club scene over the last two decades, and today it features as a staple component of the gay dance party scene in many locations.

Data on G use among Sydney gay men were first collected in periodic surveys conducted in 2004. At that time, 9% of men surveyed reported having used G in the last 6 months, a rate that increased to 13% by 2008 and remained relatively stable until 2014, although it appears to have dropped to around 11% since then (Hull et al., 2015; Zablotska, Frankland, Prestage, Down, & Ryan, 2008). But even before 2004, GHB had been experienced as a “matter of concern” (Latour, 2004) in the evolving gay club and dance party scene in Sydney, with patrons occasionally “dropping” (i.e., losing consciousness) at social venues and dance events, regular hospitalization of dance club patrons, increasing demand for accident and emergency (A&E) services in the Darlinghurst area (the nightlife precinct home to Sydney’s urban gay scene), and occasional deaths. Various forms of community mobilization had already taken place. Some gay venue owners sought to clamp down on GHB use by advertising a “zero tolerance” approach to the drug as their door policy. Others venue operators and event promoters sought out the advice and assistance of community-based health organizations and other stakeholders, calling community meetings in their bid to find viable solutions to the problem. By 2003, ACON (then known as the AIDS Council of New South Wales [NSW]) ventured a partial response to this issue by arranging to have volunteer “drug rovers” circulate among partygoers at the annual Mardi Gras dance party on the lookout for anyone experiencing drug-related difficulties. Later renamed the ACON Rovers, this project has evolved into a regular and recognized presence at gay community dance events in NSW and represents a unique and innovative response to party and drug-related harms. Although ACON has never received funding from the NSW Ministry of Health to conduct this work, it has continued to run the project for over a decade with the support of dedicated volunteers drawn from the community it targets.¹ In this article, we approach the ACON Rover Project as a distinctive innovation in the field of harm reduction and analyze its historical formation, characteristic modes of operation, and the skill sets it draws upon and its impacts.

In previous work, Race has approached harm reduction and HIV prevention as fields of “innovation in care practices,” in which the embodied habits of relevant groups become the basis for devising “new styles of public health that thematize community education and pleasure” (2008, 2011b). He suggests that “greater attentiveness to pleasure and its qualities and social dynamics may . . . provide crucial resources for devising more effective strategies of care” (2009, p. xiii). To support this claim, he draws on qualitative research that documents the practices and tactics adopted by “at-risk” groups to avoid unwanted harms in their pleasurable pursuits (Escoffier 1999; Hurley, 2002; Southgate & Hopwood, 1999, 2001; Patton, 1990; Pini, 2001; Kippax & Race, 2003; Rosengarten, Race, & Kippax, 2000). A number of studies have directed qualitative and ethnographic attention to the experience and practice of harm reduction interventions themselves (Broadhead & Fox, 1990; Broadhead & Heckathorn, 1994; Fox, 1996; Fraser & Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Wright-De Agüero, 1996) with some consideration of how relations of knowledge and credibility are negotiated during outreach and service provision. In the club drug context, fewer analyses of harm reduction services exist, and most studies

focus on the strategies that users have improvised to reduce harm in the process of consumption (see Mandler, 2016, for a recent example in the queer club context). While this qualitative literature on user practices constitutes an excellent source of information for health service providers, we seek to extend attention to practices of harm reduction service delivery and design in our analysis of the ACON Rovers, with the aim of making the practices, concerns, and techniques that constitute this project available for further thought and circulation to inform reflexive practice. Central to our argument is the idea that the Rovers' work is a form of "ontological politics" (Mol, 1999): Through certain practical steps, it changes the character of reality in its sphere of operation. In the next section, we begin to set out the theoretical basis of this argument.

Ontological Work

Drug effects are commonly understood to derive from the intrinsic properties of psychoactive substances. But a growing literature approaches drug effects as *events* that are differentially "brought into being by networks of techniques, objects and actors" (Fraser, Moore, & Keane, 2014, p. 11; see Duff, 2011; Fraser & Moore, 2011b; Gomart, 2002; Keane, 2008; Race, 2014, 2011a). Indebted to the "ontological turn" that has emanated from scholarship in Science and Technology Studies, this literature generally proceeds from the premise that the character of reality is not given in nature but rather *enacted in practice* (Mol, 2002). As Annemarie Mol puts it, "ontologies are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away, in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices" (2002, p. 7). On this view, "reality" does not precede the practices that are normally said to occur "within" it. Rather, such practices *constitute* reality (or realities): Thus, reality is enacted in practice.

This approach is particularly suggestive for the study of drug phenomena. The effects of a substance depend upon the constellation of practices and elements that make up its use on a given occasion, which together can be said to participate in the materialization of certain effects and not others (Race, 2011a, 2014). This is not to deny the material effects of psychoactive substances but to understand these effects as produced by a more extensive set of relations and practices, situating the activity of substances within particular sets of arrangements. In other words, the materialization of drug effects at any given time is relational and depends upon the activities, practices, objects, relations, and circumstances that make up that occasion. It makes a difference, for example, whether ecstasy is taken at a club with good music, air conditioning, drug-testing services, and free drinking water or in a cramped and overheated space with hostile security, aggressive patrons, and crowded bathrooms that only supply hot water (Bellis, Hughes, & Lowey, 2002; Rhodes, 2002; Race, 2011a). In other words, practices and contexts *matter*—they impact the experience, effects, and corollaries of drug use in material and significant ways (Duff, 2007; Rhodes, 2002). And this claim about practice should be taken to include not simply the practices of drug users but also those of venue operators, regulatory authorities, health-care workers, other patrons, nonhuman objects—indeed, the whole hybrid arrangement of agencies and actors that are implicated in any event involving drug consumption.

The notion that practices are constitutive of ontologies is directly relevant to our argument in this article and crucial to understanding the significance of the Rovers. By introducing new practices into the scene of gay partying that aim to attune themselves to the pleasures, dangers, characteristic habits, and possibilities of G use within these settings, the Rovers can be thought of as engaging in "arts of interception"; they seek to intervene in the materialization of GHB and other drug effects in ways that reduce harm and enhance the safety of partygoers. In this sense, we consider the Rovers to be engaged in "ontological politics" (Mol, 2002) and aim to understand what informs the versions of care they enact as well as the circumstances and tendencies that interfere with effective care practices. Drug situations are dynamic, sometimes volatile, and invite forms of attention that contribute to what these situations become—the possibilities that ensue from intervention. Drawing on Stengers, our study of the Rovers considers the ontological impacts of different ways of paying attention (2015).

Problematizing G

In his study of GHB use in diverse club scenes in Melbourne, Cameron Duff argues that “GHB is used in subtly different ways in each of these cultural scenes, fashioned by prevailing cultural norms and peer influences, as well as the policies and practices of individual venue owners, bar and security staff” (2005, p. 643). He argues that “greater sensitivity to the cultural dynamics of individual dance scenes should . . . be an essential element of all future harm reduction programs in club and rave settings” (p. 649). He flags the importance of cooperation between diverse stakeholders in this regard (including “club and bar owners, rave promoters, deejays, first aid services, and police as well as young people themselves”; p. 649). We agree with Duff but wish to stress the heterogeneous and at times conflictual nature of the aims, perceptions, strategies, and practices of these diverse stakeholders and the ontopolitical and dynamic nature of the labor of cooperation around such matters. In this study, we found that negotiating the practices of diverse stakeholders was a crucial component of the Rovers’ work. Not only has the success and continuation of the Rovers’ project depended on how it has addressed and responded to certain of the “problems” experienced by other stakeholders, but these various stakeholders adopt different (and at times incommensurable) approaches to the G “problem” (not to mention the shifting terrain of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or intersex [LGBTI] party culture in general). Indeed, these different agencies tend to experience and produce it as a different sort of problem altogether.

In this respect, we consider the relevant stakeholders to be engaged in diverse and sometimes conflicting practices of “problematization.” This concept was first coined by Foucault to refer to the “ensemble of discursive and nondiscursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought” (Foucault cited in Rabinow, 2005, p. 43). Foucault draws attention to the constraints at work in any process of problematization but also suggests that there are always several possible ways of responding to “the same ensemble of difficulties”—of making any given ensemble of difficulties into “problems to which diverse solutions are proposed.” Thus, for Foucauldian scholars, attention to the situated nature of problematizations enables a “freeing up” of possibilities, since it allows one to imagine how a given problem situation might be enacted otherwise on the basis of a different set of perceptions, framings, and practices (for applications of this approach, see Bacchi, 2009; Fraser & Moore, 2011a, 2011b; Lancaster, Duke, & Ritter, 2015; Lancaster & Ritter, 2014; Lancaster, Seear, & Treloar, 2015; Pienaar & Savic, 2016; Race, 2009). On this basis, we argue that defining and redefining the “GHB problem” (in connection with the range of implicated agencies) is part of the ontological work of the Rovers project (and, we would suggest, harm reduction initiatives more generally). As the example of the Rovers shows, this work is not simply theoretical or even necessarily always discursive: It takes place in “discursive and nondiscursive” ways, or, to use Annemarie Mol’s terms, “in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices” (2002, p. 7).

Method

To conduct this analysis, we employed a range of methods. We ran a focus group with key individuals who were involved in the design, management, and development of the ACON Rovers project over the course of its existence from 2003 to the present, including past ACON employees, volunteers, and officers presently associated with the project ($n = 7$). The aim was to gain insight into the circumstances that led to the formation of the project; the organizational and sociopolitical constraints within which the project emerged and tries to work, the skills required of volunteers, the project’s relations with other agencies and stakeholders, and the general experience of running the project. We also held informal discussions with ACON staff members involved with the Rovers project from August 2014 to February 2015 and collected documents related to the management and representation of the project

within the organization as well as promotional materials aimed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) communities. The first author of this article underwent training as a Rover and attended two well-known Sydney gay dance parties that regularly engage the services of the ACON Rovers and at which G use is prevalent in order to conduct participant observation. ACON also supplied us with data gathered from the evaluation of Rover training sessions over the years as well as Event Reports from dance parties the Rovers attended from 2003 to the present. Ethics approval to conduct this research was granted by the authors' institution and by the ACON's research ethics review committee in August 2014 (ACON 2014/21).

The G Problem(s)

When G first became popular on the LGBT club and party scene in Sydney, the sort of problem it *was* depended on the situation and the characteristic practices, concerns and responsibilities of the agencies and actors that apprehended it. In the words of one focus group participant,

people were dropping left, right and centre. And it was so bad that the venues, the clubs up on the strip were reporting to us that, at the end of the night, they'd take their glasses in to be washed and all the inside was like paint. It's a paint stripper (FGP1).

This put licensees in a difficult situation, since by law, they must account for physical casualties on their premises and they risk losing their license if they do not find some way of dealing with such possibilities. "[Some event organisers] were really concerned that they would get shut down because people were getting very sick very quickly and they were concerned they wouldn't be allowed to run the next one" (FGP2). Different venues managers and event organizers responded in different ways to this predicament. Reportedly, one sex-on-premises venue put "all these 'ban everything!' posters all over the place" in response to "people passing out in the spa and in the rooms and the cubicles" (FGP2).

From my memory there was a real split in the community. There was real aggression from people who didn't take G towards people who did take G. And [also] the party promoters And the sex venue owners. Like, signs that any G and you're kicked out, and you're banned for life completely. (FGP3)

[Some venues] were taking pictures . . . of people dropping. (FGP4)

To use it as a shaming tool. (FGP3)

Not all venues adopted a prohibitive approach. Promoters of one popular gay party adopted a tagline that was publicized in promotional material and signs at the party: "upright and eyes open at all times" (FGP3), which sought to alert patrons to some of the physiological precursors of G overdose. Here, it was not G use itself, but the manifestation of certain signs and effects of the drug that became problematized, subject to vigilance and potential interdiction. The ongoing possibility of G use among patrons was acknowledged in a way that set parameters around acceptable use. Other venues were keen to work out how to exercise what they felt was their duty of care toward patrons: "[Some] venues, didn't wanna throw them out because they felt that the streets were dangerous. But they didn't know how to look after them in the clubs" (FGP5). In response, a community forum was held in the early 2000s, involving "a lot of key venue staff and a couple of party promoters talking about the changes in drug culture that had been happening over the last couple of years" (FGP5). The forum enrolled ACON managers and staff in the process of translating this "ensemble of difficulties" into a soluble problem.

Another agency implicated in the early experience of GHB was the A&E service of inner-city hospitals. At this time, GHB overdose presentations were becoming "a regular weekend

phenomenon” (Caldicott & Kuhn, 2001; Degenhardt, Darke, & Dillon, 2002; Duff, 2005) and the dramatic increase in people requiring emergency services attracted media attention that problematized these incidents as a “drain on resources.” The question of who should take responsibility for the problem was one of the key issues in contention here. Staff running the A&E services at one Sydney hospital reportedly made contact with ACON at this time, “saying ‘It’s your community. What are you doing about it?’” (FGP3). One A&E manager was said to “push that [point] quite a lot and became quite involved for while.” This constituted G casualties as a “gay community” problem, imposing a distinction between gay community and the general population, contributing to certain “dividing practices” (Bacchi, 2009).

At about this time, LGBT drug use was also beginning to attract increased scrutiny from another agency, the NSW police, who cited drug laws as a reason to use drug detection dogs to patrol clubs, venues, and parties and subject patrons at these venues to drug searches (see Race, 2011b, 2014). The use of drug dogs represented a significant and controversial change in the NSW police’s approach to drug use and created a range of tensions among community, event organizers, venue managers, the police, and community-based health agencies. For ACON, this police strategy was thought to threaten the effectiveness of harm reduction approaches in the sense that it could lead to more dangerous forms of drug consumption. “That’s when [the police] first started to take [sniffer dogs] around the big parties and we were worried that people were gonna neck things on the way in” (FGP1).

Historically, the use of drug detection dogs has been justified with reference to prohibitionist principles, which tend to conceive of “the drug problem” as a function of the circulation and consumption of particular substances deemed illicit. Law enforcement is principally charged with the task of preventing the circulation and use of these substances. But this way of problematizing drugs is contested, most notably within harm reduction discourse. For example, drug dog operations have been implicated in the emergence of potentially dangerous practices of drug consumption, such as preloading, “necking things on the way in” (FGP1) and the concealment of drugs in bodily orifices as users attempt to avoid detection (Lancaster, Hughes, & Ritter, 2016; Race, 2014). Because this police strategy has been implicated in a new set of dangers for drug users, questions emerge about its effectiveness.

In contemporary governmental domains such as health and environmental risk (including, we suggest, drug policy), State prevention is governed by a “precautionary principle” that Stengers characterizes as “rather timid” because it “respects the precoded stage on which it intervenes” (2015, p. 63, see also Diprose, Stephenson, Mills, Race, & Hawkins, 2008). For Stengers, this precoding produces an “injunction not to pay attention” since it ignores the possibility of unprefigured emergencies (2015, p. 65). The precoding of certain drugs as illicit can be understood to work in similar ways, in that “danger” is fixed in certain substances as though an intrinsic property of them. This positions law enforcement as external to its sphere of operation, effectively absolving it from the obligation to pay attention. The Rovers, by contrast, have developed a specific *mode of attending to risk* (or what Stengers might call an “art of paying attention”) that emerges from understanding themselves as *part* of the party environment, immersed and implicated in the production of possibilities—that is, in the event’s becoming.

ACON first responded to the problems associated with GHB use by producing social marketing campaigns consisting of posters and pamphlets that provided harm reduction advice, designed to target nightclubs and dance parties. But significantly, it was a new distribution of roles in the running of party events that led to real innovations in ACON’s response to GHB. In 2002, the organizers of the biggest LGBT dance party of the calendar year, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, became insolvent, leading an alliance of community-based organizations to form New Mardi Gras, a temporary organization that would underwrite the party and take on its organization and management in 2003 (see Race, 2009). ACON was one of the organizations that became part of New Mardi Gras.

So we had to make sure it was a bloody good party and there were no dramas from it. And so, cause we were running the party, we then went ‘there’s a G problem. It’s gonna happen at the party. How are we gonna get Mardi Gras Medical to them?’ (FGP1)

In other words, the insolvency of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras redistributed some of the responsibilities for the party experience and provided new opportunities to work more closely with party organizers. This prompted a new, more thoroughgoing response to the GHB problem on ACON’s part, since ACON was constituted temporarily in this instance not simply as a health organization but as part of New Mardi Gras, the entity hosting the event. This temporary “becoming other” of the organization prompted a degree of creativity in addressing the problems associated with G. Or rather, G became a new sort of problem for ACON, a problem of potential liability eliciting new responsibilities and practices, since ACON was positioned differently in relation to it. While this shift in positioning gives insight into some of the conditions in which this creative response to harm reduction at party events emerged, it is relevant to note that ACON continued to develop and maintain these practices at subsequent (externally organized) parties, long after New Mardi Gras had dissolved, despite no external funding for the project. In the next section, we discuss how existing resources, initiatives, and working knowledge were combined by ACON in response to this situation, leading to the formation of the Rovers.

Roving

Since 1988, ACON has run a project called the Safe Sex Sluts, a group of volunteers who wander around major LGBT community events, including the Mardi Gras parade and party, wearing Safe Sex Slut sashes and sometimes in drag, distributing condom packs and HIV prevention information. When ACON became embedded in New Mardi Gras, it drew on this volunteer operation to construct a new project that specifically aimed to address some of the most palpable dangers of party drug use and especially the use of GHB: “[W]e came up with the Rover idea and used volunteers who were Safe Sex Sluts I think the first party they wore sashes saying ‘Drug Rovers’” (FGP1).

The Mardi Gras dance party had long offered a medical tent to assist people who experienced health problems at the dance party whether from HIV illness, drug consumption, or emotional distress (Masters, 2007; see Race, 2011b). But GHB use presented a new range of problems, namely, that people could “drop” (overdose and lose consciousness) anywhere in the large expanse of the party grounds and potentially go without being noticed or attended to by other patrons. This imbued the characteristic mode of activity of the Safe Sex Sluts (namely, walking around the party) with a new sense of purpose, and it is not insignificant that the name promoted for this new initiative (“the Rovers”) referenced this mode of activity directly. Volunteers were instructed to *rove* around the party looking for anyone experiencing difficulty and, when necessary, seek assistance or take them to the medical tent, which could engage the help of paramedics if necessary. Thus, one ACON officer involved with the early initiative referred to the project as “a set of eyes for the Mardi Gras Medical” before emphasizing the ad hoc nature of its invention, “if I remember, it happened in about two weeks” (FGP3). Others reflected on the significance of roving as the mode of operation:

I think because of our volunteers being the Sluts, that’s who we were gonna take on. But they were also familiar with parties and they would wander around anyway. So they would get a sense of what was happening and if someone was in trouble. (FGP1)

I think part of the reason why they roved rather than sitting, sitting in a tent, from what I remember, was twofold. One of them was, is a visibility thing. To make sure people knew that they were there, like a health promotion campaign, walking around in practice. But the second one, if I remember rightly, was people

were being found behind the seats. You know, like the bleachers. Quite sick. So it was actually about pro-activism; looking for people. (FGP2)

A dance party is a dynamic and heterogeneous space that is constantly being enacted and differentially materialized (Bollen, 1996; Race, 2011b). In this instance, it comprises distinct zones of interaction and activity: dance floors, bleachers, outside areas, chill out tents, and so on, spread out over many acres. Significantly, *roving* as a mode of operation made certain things available that were not available to the medical tent, giving harm reduction services a new sort of access to the geography of the party. This in turn generated a more comprehensive panorama of the drug situation throughout the various spaces that constitute the event.

And the Rovers, talking about just talking to people and dealing with people, were always really good kind of get a sense of what was happening in a party, particularly the bigger ones—on whether a particular venue was becoming problematic and whether there were too many people in there. So they were quite good with that too. (FGP1)

And I remember there was people, the Rovers would come back from their shift, or just when they were wandering around, and identify an area where there was likely to be problems. And so they would send extra people. We'd send extra people over those things, those areas. (FGP2)

In other words, the Rovers drew on their unique access to party spaces and practices to devise a particular “*mode of attending to*” the party experience.

The toilets are a particularly complex and significant space at gay dance parties. Here, people make use of the mix of public and private space (toilet cubicles) and better lighting to take their drugs, check their appearance or makeup, cruise for sex (or have it), chill, chat with friends and strangers—and occasionally go to the toilet as well. There is a risk that people on G who are using toilet cubicles for whatever purpose may drop and not be found until it is too late. For this reason, the toilets have constituted a key zone of concern for the Rovers. But the Rovers have also approached this area as a good place to provide information and harm reduction. As one FGP recounted,

The Rovers came in and made announcements in the toilets about what was happening with particular drugs. And it was done in such camp and careful way that it was like “Look after yourselves. Look after each other. This is what we know about what’s, what drugs around there. Don’t take this. If you’ve got these drugs, you know, just have a little bit If you get into trouble, look . . .” And I thought ‘Wow! What a fuckin’ great way to actually announce what’s going on. Just with a Rover in a toilet.’ (FGP5)

Here, the reference to the *style* or *manner* of information provision (“it was done in such a camp and careful way” [FGP5]) raises the significance of the cultural fit between harm reduction service provision and the communities to which it attends. It is significant that both this style of communication and the “mode of attention” discussed above activate a particular “skill set” or form of embodied knowledge, associated with “being familiar with parties.” In the next section, we discuss the significance of embodied knowledge for this mode of harm reduction.

Uses of Pleasure and Embodied Knowledge

In the previous section, we noted the significance attributed to “being familiar with parties.” This familiarity is said to be important for identifying problem areas as well as knowing how to participate in the space effectively. But being able to read a party is more than just being familiar with the party environment. To actually read a party, the Rovers need to be able to look at the party with particular

eyes, scouring the space and the relations established between patrons, their embodied dispositions and comportment, and in order to identify potential problems. These problems may include signs of overheating, “G-ing out” or “slipping into a G-hole” or “beginning to drop” (often identified by looking drowsy or slowed dance movements, being nonresponsive, or seeming to fall asleep even while standing or dancing) as well as getting overexcited or aggressive in ways that create problems for other patrons (which sometimes manifests in overenthusiastic dancing or exaggerated use of space—behaviors which may indicate having taken too big a “hit”).

I think it’s always important as a Rover to be on the dance floor, but you can sometimes tell that somebody’s going to drop because of the way in which they’re dancing and its connection to the music. And you think “Okay, that’s not right. What are you listening to in your head?” (FGP5)

While physical symptoms are important here, being able to identify them requires something other or more than medical training; it requires a working knowledge of the norms and habits and styles of interaction specific to this context. What is also important here is knowing how to participate in the space—and, if necessary, intervene—in ways that are culturally appropriate and do not arouse the suspicion or annoyance of partygoers, who may already be conscious of the illicit nature of their drug consumption and thus distrustful of official-looking people or who may not take kindly to heavy-handed interruption since their reason for coming to the party is to have a good time.

It’s not just looking for people with their eyes closed, getting to them to open their eyes and, be awake (FGP4)

There was lots of general conversations like lots of checking-in on people and just chatting to them for five minutes to see whether they could stay with you for five minutes. And, if they could, you just wandered off. So it’s not necessarily about rescuing them at that stage, but there’s assessment. (FGP2)

Being a good Rover is a really important skill-set to have and not everyone can do it like really well. That capacity to be at a party with people having fun, and, you know, to be able to get people to check in with themselves in a way that made them feel like they hadn’t done anything wrong, you know, that it didn’t freak them out, that we could stay with where people were at if they, you know, and they were having a good, a good time but you could see something was happening. Like it’s a really skilled thing to be able to do I think. (FGP4)

As these quotes indicate, when Rovers identify a potential problem situation, they try to engage the person in conversation and, if deemed necessary, make a decision to take the patron for a walk or seek more intensive forms of assistance. This procedure is informed by a mix of community knowledge and formal training, and while it is difficult to articulate the nature of the skill set it draws upon, group participants emphasized the importance of a mix of formal training and having drawn volunteers from the community or scene in question to ensure they are familiar with drug use at gay dance parties usually through having participated in the relevant spaces in a personal capacity. To develop these skills, in addition to their formal training, volunteers who are new to Roving are typically paired with more experienced Rovers at targeted events to instigate a process of “learning by doing” (Bollen & McInnes, 2007).

Researcher: So I, I mean I guess, in terms of volunteers, you want people who are familiar with the whole party culture?

FGP2: It’s pretty, it’s pretty much essential to, otherwise they just, they don’t know what they’re looking at. Like, you know, anyone just having a good time with their eyes really crossed . . . you can interpret that as, you know, they’re gonna collapse, but they’re not.

[On the skills required of Rover volunteers] You know, having, you know, great eyes and ears, and you know, it's really . . . I can't think of a word to describe it but it's a multi sort of faceted role and, but key to it is being *in* the party and enjoying it, and having fun while at the same time taking on a very important role. (FGP4)

In the professional discourse of health promotion, this mode of activity is sometimes referred to as “peer education” and/or “peer support” (Trautmann, 1995; Parkin & McKeganey, 2000). While the Rovers are crucially a peer-based service, these categories are not quite adequate though. The Rovers certainly “educate” patrons, but they also act as sources of “peer support” and something more, since what they are also engaged in is “reading” the party and a certain “art of interception” that takes into account the emotional states of partygoers and how these may impact upon the drug experience. In the anecdote that follows, one FGP draws upon—but also pushes beyond—some of the professional discourses of health promotion in her attempt to make sense of the sorts of intervention the Rovers make:

An important component of being a Rover is being a peer, you know, and peer education. You know, at times being able to say, ‘Look, I know what that’s like.’ So that people understood you were not just talking textbook to them, you know, that you’ve been in similar situations yourself. There was a guy I remember on [a gay cruise] who was just sitting on his own, sort of staring into space. He wasn’t in a nice space at all. And just a 10-minute walk around with him and he was absolutely fine again. When he was getting off the ship he came up and said thanks, because *he could have gone somewhere completely different* had we not just had that . . . you know. It’s—not wanting to get theoretical necessarily—but it’s a perfect example of a ‘brief intervention.’ And it’s that, and ‘peer education.’ And I think it’s marvellous health promotion. (FGP4)

Intercepting effectively in these sorts of situations involves understanding the party as an event *in process*—that is, as a dynamic, heterogeneous, evolving space in which any number of trajectories are possible and in which it is possible to play an active part in what eventuates for people. This in turn calls upon a form of practical, embodied knowledge that involves some familiarity with drug situations, including the emotional states of partying and how these can affect the drug experience. Duff (2005) has emphasized the importance of having regard to the *cultural contexts* of G use when devising appropriate harm reduction measures. Race has described harm reduction as a form of practical care that benefits from a “focus on pleasure and its social pragmatics” (2009, p. 420). Here, we suggest that *embodied knowledge* attuned to the *social pragmatics of pleasure* (and all the elements that make it up in a given situation) is a critical component of the Rover’s project, conceived as an initiative that aims to intervene in the materialization of unwanted drug effects. Through their “brief interventions” and their general participation in the party/process, the Rovers aim to stave off certain dangers and possibilities immanent in the use of GHB and produce better experiences for partygoers.

Establishing Trust; Differentiating Care From Security

Part of the emotional landscape of partying includes the fear and suspicion partygoers may experience in relation to drug enforcement and security practices. As we discussed earlier, the growing popularity of GHB took place at a time of increasing police surveillance of drug use at gay events and venues as well as heightened security in some venues and locations informed by zero tolerance policies induced by licensing laws and overt policing. This created a significant practical problem for the Rovers, since it tends to produce a climate in which partygoers are more likely to be wary of uniformed officers. G users may also be conscious of the potential for the sexualized forms of interaction with which G is associated to be frowned upon by unsympathetic venue personnel. The illicit standing of not only drug

use but also homosexual expressivity in some quarters informs the general landscape in which these health interventions operate. Providing harm reduction services in such a climate is obviously challenging, since partygoers are likely to avoid official-looking people rather than seeking help from them where necessary. In some of the material quoted in the previous section, we can see that the emotional disposition of partygoers in relation to security forms an important consideration for the Rovers; for example, when one ACON officer stresses the significance of being able “to get people to check in with themselves in a way that made them feel like they hadn’t done anything wrong, you know, that it didn’t freak them out.” Here, as elsewhere, the anticipation of partygoers’ embodied situation, including their likely fear of apprehension by security and/or police officers, informs the very *mode of attending* to patrons adopted by project participants.

The Rovers have taken a number of practical steps to redress this fear of apprehension and differentiate themselves from other officers that patrol drug use. Publicizing the role and function of the Rovers through social marketing at party venues has been a key strategy. In one manager’s words, “[I]t was about educating the community so they weren’t gonna be afraid, and so they actually knew what to look for, if their friend was in trouble, to come up to someone” (FGP3). A second strategy has involved efforts to differentiate the Rovers from security and other officials that circulate in the party space. One of the most significant changes has been to the color of the vest worn by volunteers. Initially dressed with fluorescent yellow vests, the Rovers were frequently confused with security personnel, since yellow vests are commonly used by tradespeople, security companies, and staff in general. “Some people would still freak out about how they [the Rovers] looked because they looked like security” (FGP1). To keep the Rovers identifiable and visible to partygoers as a source of community-based support, the color of the Rovers’ vests was changed from yellow to fluorescent pink—a color long associated with gay community—and this change was publicized in promotional materials. The pink vests function to give the Rovers a distinctive and recognizable identity that differentiates them from other officials that may operate in party spaces.²

It is worth pausing to consider the significance of this simple but effective change. This modification of the semiotics of the uniform suggests to its publics that possible responses to drug use are not in fact uniform and that there are multiform ways of attending authoritatively to the potential harms of drug use within the space of the party. More suggestively, it induces a change in the problem that constitutes the focus of official concern (from preventing drug use per se to preventing tangible and emerging harms), and in this sense, it might be thought of as a provocation that opens up a space in which it becomes possible to enact or attend to health concerns differently.

Interestingly, the significance of the Rover’s embodied appearance does not stop at the level of uniform. While avoiding *looking* like other officials is important, not *acting* or *behaving* like them can be just as significant. Hence the careful attention to their *mode of participation* in the party: Rovers are specifically encouraged to maintain a friendly and approachable outlook, as they move through the spaces of the party; “key to it is being *in* the party and enjoying it, and having fun while at the same time taking on a very important role” (FGP4). There are limits to the Rovers’ participation in the party, of course. It’s against ACON policy for volunteers to consume drugs or alcohol themselves during their shift. Nevertheless, this attention to party comportment and the mode or manner of participation—the sense of being *in* the party rather than standing outside it—is the result of a very skilled appreciation of the affective climate and potential emotional trajectories of party spaces, how these are shaped by an historical context of drug enforcement, and a developed sense of how different styles of intervention influence people’s propensity to access or avoid care. If the Rovers are engaged in a form of surveillance, it is one that has regard to the *affective relations of surveillance*, which are very much implicated in the ontological corollaries of different modes of surveillance (what eventuates in different arrangements); hence, our claim that the Rovers are engaged in ontological politics (Mol, 1999, 2002).

Evaluating the Rovers: Accounting for Impact

Designed, redesigned, and solidified over time, the Rovers now carry a recognizable and unmistakable identity within the LGBT dance community. From the moment they enter the party, wearing their pink fluoro vests emblazoned with their logo, the Rovers are showered with words and gestures of excitement, encouragement but above all, gratefulness from partygoers. “[E]veryone loves the Rovers” (FGP1) “[a]nd the Rovers love doing it for that reason” (FGP3), participants suggested, and this was certainly evident in our participant observation exercises with the project. This enthusiasm for the project is undeniably flattering, but it is more than just pleasant for the people involved. This recognition and appreciation of the project on the part of its target community is an achievement in itself and must be recognized as the outcome of ongoing strategic work, deliberate reflection, and adaptation of the project on the part of the organization. Such processes are all the more significant, given the controversial nature of drug use and partygoers’ apprehension of official surveillance measures. As active participants in party spaces, rather than just “voyeurs” or supervising authorities, the Rovers have built significant ties with the LGBTI dance community in Sydney and NSW, achieving an evident level of recognition, affection, and community support for their activities.

While gaining acknowledgment from the patrons attending the parties can be taken as one measure of success, evaluating the project in terms that make sense to health authorities raises challenges. Since the project does not receive external funding, the project is best characterized as an ancillary activity on the part of the organization, relying mainly on volunteer labor and extra work on the part of the project’s managers. There is no question that the project contributes to the overall public health objective of reducing drug harms, including reducing the impact of GHB use on A& E services. Last year, the project provided more than 500 hr of service at 15 community events, interacting with more than 1,750 partygoers and assisting more than 140 people (ACON, 2015). But making this contribution evident in terms that “count” (i.e., are legible to funders) poses challenges that are themselves worth reflecting on for the insights they give into shortcomings of official techniques of measuring impact and assessing the value of public health programs.

For their part, the Rovers have installed their own practices of documentation and self-evaluation. Volunteers and managers report all the incidents they encounter and detail the interventions—when they were needed—at the end of each shift on formal Event Incident Forms. Feedback about their experiences and suggestions are elicited on an ongoing basis to help ACON improve the Rover service. After key events, debriefs are held in which the Rovers volunteers, supervisors, and event organizers meet to discuss their experience of the event, and this informs the ongoing delivery of the service. The project has evolved in response to these incidents. Most of the changes—including, for example, the change of the vest color from yellow to pink—have happened as a result of the feedback reports and debriefs. As in the case of vests, which were redesigned in response to the high number of reports that they were being mistaken for security, many other modifications to the project reflect the fact that the managers are engaged in an iterative and reflexive process in order to constantly improve the service. Event Incident Forms are also used to generate feedback to the event promoters and modify the project itself through small and incremental changes to Rover practices and training procedures over time.

To explore the question of evaluation further, we put a question to the Rovers focus group directly: What does it take to make a Rovers event successful? But the key answer—“nothing happens”—belies the labor involved in making this “nothing” possible. Is a good event one in which Rovers do not have to do very much or would that just be the sign of a quiet party? The question bears directly on the *potential* and *emergent* nature of the harms associated with the sort of incidents the Rovers intervene in. The difficulty here concerns the challenge of determining whether the absence of any problems associated with the use of G (or other psychoactive substances) at a given event is a function of the lack of drug use at a given event or the possibility that patrons are making use of drugs but doing it with the appropriate care. In this scenario, it can become difficult to surmise the reasons for their

presence not being “needed.” When questioned about what makes the Rovers’ performance a success, one participant stressed:

It would be if you were able to intervene and prevent something to get worse. If there were a couple of incidents where you could intervene and keep things level so they either didn’t need to go to Medical or if they got to Medical in time. (FGP3)

In their discussion, participants highlighted the importance not only of attending well to specific events but influencing the culture of LGBTI partying more broadly:

[W]hat the Rovers did was change the way in which people looked after each other, and saw that they were, they needed to look after each other, and that the Rovers were one way of doing that but that people could talk about their drug use with their mates or with these volunteers at events and there wasn’t a judgement. And then, from that, they were able to get better information. (FGP5)

What this comment indicates is that the Rovers are more than mere providers of harm reduction and brief interventions to patrons, and they see themselves as crucially involved in instituting a “culture of care” within LGBTI dance communities (Hurley, 2002). By “culture of care,” we mean the tendency of looking after each other within the parties, for example, by being emotionally supportive, looking out for one’s peers, and preventing others from getting to the point where their night is eroding. Each of these activities is part of the “art of paying attention” that the Rovers draw upon and mobilize (Stengers, 2015). That LGBTI dance communities are (or have the potential to be) “cultures of care” was an idea directly referenced by Rovers personnel and a highly salient concept for them. It can be broken down into a set of practices and attitudes the Rovers glean from the embodied experience of the events they attend to and attempt to cultivate and multiply through their own example. As we have argued, these practices instigate forms of collective reflexivity—both formal and informal—about the experience of party events. Caring and looking after one’s peers directly affects the way the party goes and is an ethic that Rovers aim to cultivate generally among partygoers. Deleuze describes “practical ethics” as a matter of considering how “individuals enter into composition with one another” and how these relations “compound directly to constitute certain capacities,” in this case, among partygoers (1992, p. 628). We have suggested a party’s success requires some comprehension of its parts as intimately interconnected and some consideration of the manner in which these parts are composed into an effective whole. By way of their practical example, the Rovers seek to instantiate a general “culture of care” among party drug users that pays attention to these interconnections: That this is their objective was confirmed in the comments of one participant who looked forward to a time in which the Rovers would not be needed at all.

Conclusion

Dance events have long played a significant role in LGBTI community formation, including the forging of affective bonds and social networks that endure among participants. If drug harm is conceived as a potential immanent to partying with psychoactive substances, then the Rovers’ contribution to ensuring successful parties with a minimum of critical incidents and a maximum degree of collective pleasure might be considered a good measure of public health effectiveness. In this article, we have described how Rovers contribute to these objectives, and how the embodied knowledge of community volunteers and staff becomes enrolled in the work of devising practical harm reduction measures “from below.” This is achieved, we have argued, by approaching the party as an event “in process”; by devising modes of attending to, and engaging with, dance events that take the affective dispositions of partygoers seriously; and by developing “arts of interception” that are sensitive to the

dynamics of these cultural scenes, attuned to their social pragmatics of pleasure, contributing to the reduction of critical incidents, and the promotion of care practices among participants more generally. This has been accomplished by the use of concrete, formal and informal, reflexive procedures and feedback mechanisms that enable those running the project to engage in iterative or ongoing evaluation and adaptation of the project. This is significant, since LGBTI partying practices are constantly evolving and will inevitably continue to give rise to new materialities.

There is no doubt that the consumption of G is associated with significant and serious dangers. In approaching these dangers, not as intrinsic qualities of these substances, but as potential effects of the sorts of relations and sociomaterial arrangements in which G consumption takes place, the Rovers are engaged in ontological work that refutes the pharmacological determinism of official drug discourses and pays attention instead to the manner in which different possibilities emerge. Isabelle Stengers has suggested that in the neoliberal context, governmental authorities require us to forget “the *art* of paying attention” (2015, p. 66):

If there is an art, and not just a capacity, this is because it is a matter of learning and cultivating, that is to say, making ourselves pay attention. Making in the sense that attention here is not related to that which is defined as a priori worthy of attention, but as something that creates an obligation to imagine, to check, to envisage, consequences that bring into play connections between what we are in the habit of keeping separate.

Drug polices and emergency services are usually conceived as practices that are separate or external to their field of operation. The Rovers’ approach to harm reduction can be considered distinctive for the connections it makes between what happens at parties and the relations authorities and organizers manage to cultivate with partygoers and other participants. By attending to the manner in which the many entities that make up a party come together, the Rovers “bring into play connections between what we are in the habit of keeping separate” (Stengers, 2015, p. 66). As anyone familiar with party culture will know, the use of party drugs give rise to many possibilities, including pleasure, care, risk, safety, intimate connections, danger, and excitement. Realizing the possibilities of care, safety, and community depends on how parties are governed and, in particular, the relations of trust and attentiveness that authorities cultivate in a domain traditionally beset by apprehensions of punishment and exposure on the part of participants. As the Rovers (among other harm reduction initiatives) demonstrate by way of example, only some of the possibilities associated with the use of party drugs at dance events are dangerous to the bodies that enact them, and there happen to be some practical ways of averting some of the key dangers. Their example reveals that there is much to be learnt from care innovations that emerge outside the terms, or from within the interstices, of increasingly professionalized public health institutions, practices, and discourses.

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Notes

1. The NSW Ministry of Health principally funds ACON to conduct HIV-related programs.
2. A second modification involved changing the name of the project from the Drug Rovers to the ACON Rovers in 2007. The new name was thought to better reflect the mix of peer support activities the Rovers engage in not

all of which relate exclusively to drug use. But the change was also made to protect the project from anti-drug criticism as well as to protect people seeking assistance from the project. For example, it was suggested that some people might hesitate to approach the Drug Rovers, if approaching them could be taken as a sign that they had consumed illicit drugs.

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