

# Afterword: Tensions and possibilities for a narcofeminist sociology

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## Abstract

In this piece we reflect on the tensions and complexities of drug use that narcofeminism has prompted us to grapple with in producing this collection. Narcofeminist approaches challenge us to move beyond simplistic, moralistic frameworks that pathologise and stigmatise those who use drugs, and instead seek more nuanced understandings of the social, cultural and political forces through which drug use materialises. By foregrounding the experiences of women and other marginalised groups who use drugs, narcofeminism highlights the ways in which drug consumption is always already gendered, racialised and classed. Narcofeminist approaches insist on a double vision attuned to violence and suffering as well as the possibility of alternative realities. This dual vision recognises a historical and contemporary context of dehumanisation while embracing and reclaiming new forms of humanness that challenge the figure of Enlightenment Man; it insists on the complexities of drug use that are all too often elided by singular stories of pain/pleasure and benefit/harm. Ultimately, narcofeminism challenges us to rethink our assumptions about drug use, and to recognise the voices and subjectivities of people who consume drugs, even in the face of intense hostility and oppression. By doing so, narcofeminist approaches have the potential to enrich and expand the sociological study of drug use and to contribute to drug policies that prioritise care and community over punishment and control.

## Keywords

drug user activism, feminisms, marginalised groups, narcofeminism, sociology of drugs

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We begin this afterword by revisiting the closing remark of one of the narcofeminist activists<sup>1</sup> we interviewed. When asked how we can support the narcofeminist movement and vision, she replied simply: 'I think you can help us by talking positively about us, by showing the human face of an unpopular problem.' We remain struck by the apparent modesty of this request. It reminds us of the struggles that confront women and other marginalised groups who use drugs, where humanising them is a positive move to challenge the pernicious stigma associated with illicit drug use. Although in some circles the notion of the human is challenged (Butler, 2021), in the context of the narcofeminist movement it is used expressly to contest the rendering of those who use drugs as less than human. It is an explicit attempt to recuperate those who are made minoritarian in a schema where moral judgements play to modes of exploitation and oppression. Here the narcofeminists' appeal to 'show the human face' of drug use functions to drive home the stark contextual and structural factors associated with prohibitionist drug policy that shape experiences of drug use and drug-related oppression in different geographical contexts. It also draws attention to the privileged environments in which many sociological accounts of drug use are situated, that is, in Western liberal democracies such as Australia, the UK and most Western European countries where drug policy is more oriented to public health rather than punitive measures such as pre-trial detention, mandatory minimum prison sentences and, in some cases, the death penalty. But this request or invitation is also doing more. It alludes to the historical campaigns and political economies of dehumanisation that disproportionately affect feminised and racialised people who use drugs. It invites a conversation on minoritised drug practices informed by the recognition of our common connectedness but that is also sensitive to difference and diversity of experience. And it stresses the importance of 'talking positively'. Thought about in this way, this deceptively simple, modest request helps draw together the shared interests of the authors in this collection and alludes to the unique contribution of narcofeminisms<sup>2</sup> for sociology.

Narcofeminisms prompt us to grapple with the complexities of drug use, as brought into focus by women and other gender minorities who consume drugs. It pushes us to find new and better concepts for articulating the histories, political economies and tensions in people's drug consumption where stories of pain and suffering or celebratory accounts of pleasure are revealed as equally reductive, one-dimensional depictions that flatten diverse experiences of living with drugs. Instead, narcofeminist approaches engage the complexities of drug consumption where drug-related risks and harms do not occlude their rewards and benefits, and patterns of violence and oppression do not foreclose practices of care and community-building. The women and other minoritised peoples in this volume offer us a way of holding onto these tensions, refusing the tendency to draw neat distinctions that circumscribe, and ultimately impoverish our understandings of people's diverse experiences with drugs. Moreover, they show us how drugs themselves are involved in ethico-political practices and help to engender new ways of thinking, feeling and living. As such, we suggest that narcofeminist approaches are ontopolitically oriented (Fraser, 2020) in that they advocate for and help to produce more expansive realities, ones that may open our thinking on questions of justice, care and well-being.

The monograph hinges on the idea that narcofeminisms – the everyday practices of narcofeminism – can take the sociology of drugs to these places of discomfort and tension where it has often struggled to go. Where the conventional sociology of drugs

remains focused on the rational subject as highlighted in the introductory article (Dennis et al., this volume), narcofeminisms reach towards a more collective and hopeful vision for a feminist future with drugs. This also differs from moves towards the ‘material’ and ‘more-than-human’ in the sociology of drugs and critical drug studies. As Kane Race points out in his contribution to this volume, in our eagerness to identify the limits of the rational drug-using subject (the neoliberal subject of harm reduction) (Moore, 2008), we may have gone too far in the opposite direction. He argues that while posthumanist and new materialist scholarship of this kind

provides indispensable critical, conceptual and methodological tools for tracing the materialisation of drug events [it] is less forthcoming about the cultural registers, the genres of experience, the gestural forms through which these relational dynamics are grasped by (historically situated) human subjects.

This is particularly stark ‘where the precedential power of the concept of sovereignty looms poignantly, both in performative acts of state violence and decolonial (Indigenous) critiques of them’ (Race, this volume). Drawing on narcofeminist and decolonial feminist thinking, Race explores how drug policing, specifically strip-searching, functions as a dehumanising form of sovereign violence to which marginalised groups are subjected. His analysis exposes the violent logics of police power, arguing that they ‘produce certain populations [notably indigenous Australians, racial minorities and LGBTIQ+ people] as abject in order to shore up settler-colonial determinations of (individual and national) sovereignty’.

Narcofeminist thinking holds these tensions and struggles without trying to reconcile or erase them. These are the ‘toggles’ and ‘new collectivities’ that Campbell and Race respectively speak to in their essays.

[The] toggles between violences that have already happened and the need to undo them nonetheless, between the condition of being already altered and the struggle to become otherwise in the aftermath. (Murphy, 2017, p. 5 cited in Campbell, this volume)

[The struggle] to assemble new collectivities that foreground the relationality of bodies in the process of protesting unjust forms of violation. (Race, this volume)

This is narcofeminism’s unique contribution to a sociology that has difficulty holding in focus these seemingly contradictory forces. Narcofeminist approaches insist on this double vision of violence, suffering, *and* the possibility of alternative realities. This dual vision recognises a historical and contemporary context of dehumanisation while embracing and reclaiming new forms of humanness that challenge the figure of Enlightenment Man; it insists on the complexities of drug use that are all too often elided by singular stories of pain or pleasure; and, crucially, it pushes the sociology of drugs into a new register where researchers and participants alike are engaged in acts of worldbuilding.

## Dehumanisation and new forms of humanness

A key contribution of narcofeminist thinking is its twin recognition of the dehumanising logic at the heart of dominant discourses on illicit drug use *and* the possibilities for

embracing new forms of humanness that challenge the figure of Enlightenment Man. Here we are once again reminded of the narcofeminists' request to show the 'human face of an unpopular problem' – a problem that is firmly situated in these forms of exclusion. Elsewhere in our interview with narcofeminist representatives, they described how they are expected to be meek, passive mothers: '[we] are supposed to be looking down at the floor and at the ground' (Bessonova et al., this volume). This is an expectation that carries over to their campaigning. When they speak about drug consumption in a way that is not strictly within the neoliberal medical frame of reducing harm, they are castigated for this breach and dismissed as feminised others in terms that evoke the figure of the 'hysterical woman': 'Oh, these women, what are they doing, these crazy women!? I don't understand, I don't support it.' As narcofeminist activists, they are doubly stigmatised: outlawed as people who use drugs *and* seen as transgressing normative societal expectations of them as women. In terms of the former, because illicit drugs are seen as threatening the sovereign agency of the neoliberal body and its controlled pleasures (Moore, 2008), people who use drugs pose a threat to the neoliberal values of autonomy and freedom, evoking a deep-seated fear of dependence and the loss of identity and agency. Moreover, women and gender minorities who use drugs are positioned as vectors of moral contamination who have transgressed the norms of femininity, their bodies seen as hypersexualised, 'dangerous, diseased and polluted' by their enslavement to drugs (Maher, 1997, p. 194, see also Campbell, 2000).

For women and other minoritarian peoples who use drugs, exclusion is therefore always working on multiple axes. This monograph speaks to these multiplicities and the tensions they embody as narcofeminism confronts the limits of the sovereign subject. As Chang (this volume) puts it, 'we are both not enough and too much. . . . We are too loud and out-of-control, too rebellious, too uncouth, too irrational, and disordered.' Living and surviving in the interstitial spaces of dominant regimes of power and control, narcofeminists may be understood as adding to more plural conceptions of what it means to be a woman or minoritised person who consumes drugs: not a disordered, irrational figure, but one drawn from the vast creativity of experience. This may involve joy, imaginative play, solidarity and connection with other women and minoritised peoples as well as pain, suffering and subjection to policing and drug law enforcement.

Furthermore, narcofeminisms extend and reclaim new versions of what we might consider constitutes human experience or humanness. Here we reflect on the narcofeminist activists' reference to the Metzineres in Barcelona: 'an amazing grassroots movement of women, non-binary, queer and all kinds of women who exist in this world' (Bessonova et al., this volume). The Metzineres website explains how they are reclaiming the term Metzineres, the Catalan word for 'witch', a term that has historically been used to pathologise and subjugate women, and particularly their experimentation with substances in pursuit of alternative remedies and experiences (Metzineres.org). The Metzineres reclaim this term in a celebration of the ingenuity and creativity of women and gender diverse people who use drugs in the face of adversity. Such acts are seen throughout the collection, but perhaps most overtly, in its witch-like experimentation, is Dymock's examination of women's use of psychedelic drugs for extending the limits of consciousness to imagine new possibilities for being, notably as a form of resistance to patriarchal narratives of 'self-improvement' and 'wellness'. Similarly, for Keane, the

‘drinking at home women’ engages in ‘experimental forms of enhancement within the busy days and crowded rooms of domestic life’.

Judy Chang (this volume) argues that while we must recognise experiences of societal as well as individual harm, these do not occlude the diverse, and often life-affirming reasons that women and gender minorities consume drugs. Eliding these generative aspects of drug consumption has a deadening, flattening effect: it reduces people who use drugs to disordered figures, who are seen as driven only by compulsive desires. Similar claims are made in Dennis and Pienaar’s article for understanding women’s drug consumption practices as minoritarian acts of resistance – a resistance that is very much embedded in ‘the paradox of cramped creation, the entanglement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity’ (Hartman, 2019, p. 227, cited in Dennis & Pienaar, this volume). Crucially for narcofeminisms, trauma and violence are not the sole defining experiences of women and other marginalised groups who use drugs; neither do they exclude the possibility of generating something new and productive. Indeed the legacies of gender-related trauma, violence and suffering necessitate acts of resistance oriented to forging more just, compassionate worlds. With this in mind, we turn next to the limits of binary thinking for understanding gendered drug consumption, before exploring the alternative possibilities that narcofeminism enacts for living with drugs.

## **Beyond the pleasure/pain binary: Storying new worlds**

[E]ven when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that – so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression. (Tuck, 2009, p. 416)

As Indigenous feminist scholar Eve Tuck reminds us in relation to minoritised communities, stories of pain and damage are not only insufficient in the face of the myriad complexity of their experiences, they do ontological violence in presenting an incomplete, reductive story. The contributors to this collection provide insight into quotidian acts of resistance – as ways of coping, creating, experimenting, surviving and thriving. But as we have also observed, where sociologies of drug use have centred pleasure to counter pathologising tendencies (with our own work being no exception!), this has also proved inadequate to the task of engaging the complexity, tensions and contradictions that characterise lived experiences of drug use. For critical drug scholar Peta Malins, pleasure is on the side of the sovereign subject – the figure of the rational human that relies on the image of Enlightenment Man – who, as we have seen, is deeply implicated in the oppression of people who use drugs, especially women and gender minorities. As Malins explains, ‘Pleasure brings back an . . . autonomous and agentic subject’: ‘a stratified emotionally aware self who is able to extract something familiar – a recognisable emotion or identity – from desire’ (Malins, 2017, p. 128). Malins draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s reconceptualisation of desire, rather than pleasure, arguing that it attends to the possibilities of what bodies can do and to the complex dynamics of drugs and bodies. Importantly, for our purposes, she suggests that desire offers a more useful heuristic for ‘accounting for the diversity of drug experiences, practices and motivations’ (Malins, 2017, p. 127). Similarly, it is a desire-led approach that Tuck (2009) proposes as the ‘antidote’ to ‘damage-centred research’. We therefore return to desire to articulate

the complexities of minoritised drug use in terms that exceed common narratives of pain or pleasure.

The explanatory logics of damage, hardship and suffering continue to prevail when it comes to understanding drug use. We see these threads across the monograph in terms of the repressive discourses that contributors are writing against – risk, harm, addiction, misery, stigma, etc. While not denying these realities, we recognise that centring them risks occluding acts of survival, resurgence and creativity erupting in the seams. While some harm reduction advocates argue that these stories of pain and suffering enable change – evidencing the harms of drug consumption in order to justify funding harm reduction measures – for narcofeminism, this will not do, and can generate counterproductive effects. In this vein but widening the lens beyond drug consumption, Eve Tuck warns against the detrimental effects of such a ‘theory of change’ for marginalised communities and the lasting damage of these narratives.

[R]esearch that intends to document peoples’ pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression . . . operates with a flawed theory of change: it is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalised communities yet simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless. (2009, p. 409)

The most concrete example of this in the collection is Marie Jauffret-Roustide’s study of a biomedicalised safer injecting programme where people are supported to inject drugs but in a way that makes injecting solely about reducing harm – blood-borne viruses, infections, overdose – and ‘alleviating the pain of withdrawal symptoms’. Where this kind of injecting support originates from peer-to-peer care, activism and grassroots organising, it is through its institutionalisation that the life-affirming reasons people inject opioids are ignored, which in turn reduces them to abject figures, victims of disordered compulsion. These losses have been tolerated for their perceived political gains (Fraser & Moore, 2006; Keane, 2003), i.e. they transform the ‘irrational’, ‘immoral’ drug user into a ‘rational’, ‘health-seeking’ figure deserving of state-funded treatment and healthcare. However, we reflect here on the consequences of these stories and caution against their enduring, deleterious effects, however unintended. Campbell (this volume) asks: ‘Can we undo the damage-centered work inscribed in the language of “drug-related harms” in order to bring into being harm reduction techniques that don’t fall into protectionist stances or otherwise erode agency?’

In Dennis and Pienaar’s article, we see how drug treatment relies on a ruin-redemption narrative of drug use in which the affected person presents themselves as a disordered subject in need of treatment – accounting for oneself as ‘a piece of shit’ as their case study Kim phrases it. For Kim the potential pay-off – ceasing or reducing her drug consumption – is not worth it. She refuses these narratives, and the limited options they afford, and leaves treatment. Narcofeminism rejects these stories of tragedy and pathology that people, particularly women and gender diverse people, are expected to narrate in order to access support, and warns against the harms that ricochet out, eroding self-esteem and community-building. These threats to the self and community are evident in the hierarchisation of drug users, ‘respectability politics’ (Higginbotham 1993), the authorisation of certain voices (who can tell these stories of pathology), and other forms of essentialism (Chang, this volume, see also Narcofeminism storyshare project, INPUD, 2022).

But much like these narratives of harm, a singular focus on pleasure as a counter-strategy is also insufficient in the face of the hardships and complexities of people's lives. In our interview with the narcofeminist activists, Alla Bessonova explains why the experience of drug-related pleasure is often not possible in her region, accounting for 'repressive laws', 'very low . . . quality drugs', 'police and law enforcement': 'You can't relax and get high from a substance because you're always stressed from this whole situation and when a person, a woman uses drugs, I don't know, it's not pleasure.' When drug use is so viscerally embedded in these violent social orders, pleasure is a poor descriptor and tool for political action. It is vulnerable to being weaponised against people who use drugs in the same ways as narratives of harm. Like the activists who inspire them, the versions of narcofeminism enacted in this collection reject a simplistic rendering of pleasure, favouring more capacious terms in line with the Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987, 1997) concept of desire favoured by Tuck (2009) and Malins (2017). We note words such as creativity, comfort, play, fun and experimentation to describe the life-affirming aspects of narcofeminisms that fit less comfortably into the felicitous calculus of pleasure (see Campbell, this volume). Where pleasure is discussed, it is always part of a multitude of other, often contradictory experiences. We might think of this as the 'human face' of narcofeminisms, warts and all. It does not exclude repressive forces; in fact, it may even make such powers and constraints more visible.

Keane, in her essay, suggests that the 'prioritisation of women's pleasure can sensitise us to the restrictive gender norms that are built into this figure [of the drinking at home woman]'. Even in Florêncio's and Azbel's ethnographies that are most closely connected to pleasure, this is not an individualised pursuit of hedonism or 'finding oneself'. Viewed through a narcofeminist lens, experiences of clubbing and 'chemsex' invite the question: what new constellations of sexuality and intimacy might these experiences yield? Thinking with the insights of narcofeminism, clubbing and chemsex practices are conceived as 'queer laboratories' (Florêncio) or 'intimate infrastructures' (Azbel), where drugs, bodies and technologies provoke new possibilities for living that challenge patriarchal, heteronormative accounts of connection, sexuality, gender, family and kinship. For Florêncio: 'Drugs allowed us to move past whatever boundaries we had thought delimited ourselves and our bodies' capacities for relation, pleasure and affect – for joy.' But drawing on Saldanha's ethnography of India's trance parties, Florêncio is not naïve to the privilege of his own body in these spaces (see also Azbel's account of gay spaces) and warns of the ways clubs are vulnerable to 'molar' forms of organising. This cautionary note chimes with Malins' assertion that:

By thinking through drug assemblages in terms of the ways that desire circulates, we might better understand the kinds of power relations and passions that not only drive or emerge from them, but also those that operate to stratify, categorise, police and control them. (2017, p. 129)

Taking up the themes of desire and the generative possibilities of drugs, Azbel offers an insider's view of the 'femme-forward' chemsex parties that surfaced during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns in Berlin. In response to lockdown measures that failed to account for queer modes of kinship outside the heteronormative nuclear family model, groups of gender diverse people experimented with drugs, sex and pleasure in new ways, yielding new subjectivities and experiences. In these gatherings, narcofeminism confronts the

organisation of bodies into sexed, territorialised categories. In the home, a space once demarcated by female domesticity and oppression, new modes of ‘femme-forward’ expression emerge:

Neither private nor public, coupled nor casual, club nor home (look no further than the name of the gatherings: *Klubheim*), gay nor straight, [female nor male], these queer feminist gatherings produced effects that cut across a wide range of binaries.

Compared to club spaces, Azbel observes different, more egalitarian forms of care and connection. A discourse of pleasure does not do justice to the complexities, tensions and possibilities of these narcofeminist spaces and events; an observation that resonates with Malins’ call for centring ‘desire’ over ‘pleasure’:

Flows of desire can indeed manifest as pleasure, but they can also be expressed and experienced in many other ways: ways that may be more liberating, transformative, or revolutionary, challenging who we are and how we engage with the world. (Malins, 2017, p. 128)

The possibilities afforded by the concept of desire are elaborated in Campbell’s essay where she proposes an ‘alterbiopolitics’ that ‘shifts the relentless focus on harm to one in which desire and fun can surface meaningfully’. Next we consider these alternative narcofeminist ontologies for understanding drug use beyond the harm/pleasure binary and reflect on how they contribute to sociologies of the ‘more-than-human’ more broadly.

## **A narcofeminist alterlife: Embodied speculating for a better world**

We use our stories with the intention to create new feminist realities and alternatives, so that our ‘subjectivities serve as sites of resistance’ (Du Rose, 2015, p. 137). Since we understand ourselves to be ‘made up people’ in mainstream discourses and narratives, we can therefore also remake ourselves on our own terms (Hacking, 1995). (Chang, this volume)

Alterlife is already recomposed, pained, and damaged, but potentiality nonetheless. Alterlife, as potential, challenges us to learn with a thick archive and dense present of projects of resistance and resurgence. It is also an invitation to consider what infrastructures and concepts have to be dismantled to make room for another way of being and knowing to emerge. It is an invitation to begin inhabiting alter-embodiments now. (Murphy, 2017, p. 10)

In what follows, we reflect on Nancy Campbell’s (this volume) invitation to think of the tensions, ambivalences and alternative forms of living *with* drugs as a narcofeminist alterlife. Where she applies this line of enquiry to the empirical case study of harm reduction art, we take the liberty of extending this thinking to the monograph as a whole and especially narcofeminisms’ commitment to bringing forth a better world.

With its twin vision of disrupting the oppressive legacies of drug control and ‘actively speculating ourselves and our bodies toward a more expansive future’ (Florêncio, this volume), narcofeminism keeps sight of the inequalities and overlapping forms of oppression that have sometimes been neglected in sociological imaginings of drugged

selves and worlds. As the sociology of drugs has embraced the ‘ontological turn’ with its emphasis on materiality and the ‘more-than-human’, the positive dimensions of drugs have been the focus of analytic attention. While as noted above, this is a necessary corrective against the concerns with risks and harms in drug policy and scholarship, a singular focus on pleasure may neglect the structural inequalities that shape drug practices and experiences, reinforcing patterns of social disadvantage. In this sense, narcofeminism contributes to critical thinking on the more-than-human that holds onto these tensions (Farrugia et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2015; Murphy, 2015), including as staged in this journal and monograph series (Gill et al., 2017; Latimer & López Gómez, 2019; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). It forces us to confront the tensions between posthumanist efforts to disrupt the taken-for-granted status of the human, and the needs of those who are still fighting for full inclusion into the category of the human and for recognition of their rights on this basis. Insofar as this collection grapples with these tensions, *The Sociological Review* is a fitting outlet for progressing these debates because in many ways it is with a *Sociological Review* monograph – *Actor Network Theory and After* (Law & Hassard, 1999) and specifically Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion’s influential article, ‘A sociology of attachment: Music amateurs, drug users’ – that a ‘more-than-human’ interest in drug studies emerged over two decades ago.

As we have seen across the collection, narcofeminisms comprise embodied, ethico-political practices for enacting more liveable worlds with drugs. These are minoritarian acts of worldbuilding founded on resistance to prohibitionist drug laws and related regimes of drug control. Narcofeminism acts to intervene in our drug laws, treatment systems, policy measures and discourses that subject people who use drugs to gendered, classed and racialised forms of social control. These include criminalisation, incarceration, stigma, punitive treatment systems, discriminatory policing and drug law enforcement, forcible removal of their children, involuntary psychiatric confinement, police assault, and the risks of an unregulated drug supply including toxic drug effects and overdose. In responses to these threats, narcofeminism does not sit by, engaging in critique from the sidelines, but actively intervenes to create ‘alterlives’ or better futures with drugs. As Murphy puts it: ‘With alterlife, [we] want to push back on the eugenic residual that calculates lives worth living, deviant lives, risky lives, unproductive lives, and killable lives’ (Murphy, 2017, p. 8). Narcofeminism is oriented to building realities where women and gender nonconforming people are not only able to exist with drugs, but where their drug practices are valued for opening up new forms of care, connection and kinship.

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## Notes

1. The activist in question consented to be interviewed and quoted anonymously. Hence, we have omitted her name but include the names of the narcofeminist activists who consented for their contributions to be attributed to them by name.
2. In referring to narcofeminisms in the lower case, pluralised form we seek to honour the activist movement who coined the original concept but also to recognise how it has been deployed heterogeneously in this collection for understanding drug use as a feminist sociomaterial practice.

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