



Chrome magic and risk



Sarah MacLean, PhD
sarah.maclea@turningpoint.org.au



Some sociological ideas about risk in the contemporary world





This paper



This paper considers two narratives about inhalant use and risk, drawn from accounts by young people with experience of chroming.

I argue that all young feel an imperative to practice risk. We need to understand risk not just in terms of individuals and vulnerability but as a cultural imperative that often plays out more adversely for marginalised people.

Understanding the meanings of risk behaviour can help inform interventions



Study sample



- interviews with 28 young people (13-24 years) with current or significant past experience of inhalant use, all of whom were socially and economically marginalised
- each participant interviewed between 1 and 3 times
- false names used for all participants
- narrative analysis of research transcripts, interpreted in light of theoretical ideas about risk

■ Chroming narrative # 1



- 'Chrome magic' protects people against bad outcomes from risk-taking

■ Bodies that manage physical



risk



- 'While you're on it you just feel like Superman' (Dom, 16)



Managing risk



- It feels like you can run pretty fast. And when you punch it's like a harder punch. It's like how your muscles feel while you're chroming. My muscles are normally like that [Caleb shows me his rather skinny arm in a relaxed state]. But [when I'm] chroming they're like that. Stiff, like that [Caleb pumps up his muscles]. (Caleb, 15)



Managing risk



- You felt the power and you were the man. To be able to belittle someone ... That was a good part of it I suppose. Having the power. And have the authority over someone else having to just give you their money ... You felt semi-like a king I suppose. (Michael, 24)



Confidence



- It makes you float off, forget about your past and everything, be in your own world. If anyone annoys you, you just push them aside and ignore them ... The power of chrome makes you feel like you win all the time. Whether you're winning or not you feel like you're winning because it's a drug that does make you feel uplifted and powerful and really confident within yourself. (Latoya, 19)



Risk as pleasure



- And, like, I went through stages where I'd fucking have it [the paint nozzle] constantly pushed ... constantly pushed against my shoe while I suck on it and suck on it, and it's fucking dangerous. I got an even more intense buzz out of that, this other thing [laugh]. I dunno where I come up with these names, but I call it 'wave of God'. It was, just fucking, it was something else. I always thought I was right on the line; this is living, this is dying. It was fucking really intense. (John, 18)



Feeling invulnerable to risk



- For young people who know they are viewed by adults around them as overwhelmingly 'at risk', the sense of risk-deflection that chroming affords is understandably attractive.



Chroming narrative # 2



- Over time, chroming confounds a person's sense of ability to manage risk in his or her own life, leading to an individualized sense of failure

Incapacity to manage future risk



John: And that's what I'm worried [about]. I'm concerned that OK you're telling me. I quit today OK, my health's going to improve. [But] what's going to happen in 15 years? Am I going to get emphysema? Am I going to get Alzheimer's disease because of it? That's what I worry about. I'm worrying about when I'm 30, when I'm 40. When I'm 50. I'm still young so I can recuperate you know. But [long pause].

Sarah: It's hard isn't it, because we never know what's down the track in front of us do we? ...

John: There's rumours I've heard that ecstasy can cause Parkinson's disease. So you know, if [long pause]. You use ecstasy for however long and then when you hit 60 you got Parkinson's disease because of your ecstasy use. You might have been clean for 40 years but, *fuck* it seems unfair, you get clean and then later on down the track it catches up with you and that's my concern.

Sarah: But none of us know what's going to happen to us.

John- I'll be one of those people finding out I guess. I'll be one of those.

Sarah: Well the other thing is people have been using these drugs in occupational settings for years; that's what most of these studies are based on.

John: They use masks and stuff!...But what about spraying paint into a bag so that there's *nothing in there but the fumes*. And you know what I mean there's *no* air, there's *no* holes in the bags. Know what I mean?

Inability to manage risk in the present



- I know it's destroyed a lot of my brain and stuff. I know I'm not as smart as I used to be. I can't talk as good as I used to. I can't write as good as I used to, I can't read as good as I used to. I can't do nothing as good as I used to. I haven't even got good balance anymore [bitterly]. Push something and I nearly fall over. (Manuel, 17)



Risk to future self



If I didn't chrome I could have been a long way by now. I could have done a lot of things within those times, you know. I could've like finished school. Not just year 9 or 8. Could have got a good job or something. (Veronica, 18)



[People are able to stop chroming] when they realise it's not good for them. Or when they think to themselves: 'what's this gonna to do for me in 20 years time? Will I be brain dead, or get a job or get me nothing in life? What's straightness [being drug free] going to do or what's different drugs going to do?' ... The way I thought of it was: 'What's this gonna to do for me in 20 years time? What's this gonna do for me in five years time? Will I be dead or alive', you know? (Latoya, 19)

Conclusion #1

- This paper shows how even very marginalised people are deeply concerned with managing risk and being seen to manage risks appropriately. The repertoire of risk-taking practices available to marginalised young people, however, can be particularly dangerous.
- Engaging in practices widely understood to place them 'at risk' ultimately led young people in the study to pessimistic assessments of their own capacity to manage and direct their lives.



Conclusion #2



Young people's concern with risk management may be used -

- To support harm reduction interventions
- To encourage young people to think about long term consequences of drug use
- To provide opportunities for risk-taking and support development of narratives which reinforce less harmful forms of risk



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