

‘You’re with your ten closest mates...
and everyone’s kind of in the same boat’:
Friendship, Masculinities and Men’s Recreational
Use of Illicit Drugs

Clay Darcy

ABSTRACT: Based on empirical sociological research, this article explores how some Irish men’s recreational use of illicit drugs, masculinities and friendship, interconnect. Drawing from in-depth interviews with twenty Irish men who identified as recreational users of illicit drugs, the article examines men’s drug taking within homosocial contexts as a friendship practice. By conceptualising masculinities as relational, socially constructed and fluid, the article examines social aspects of men’s drug taking as part of a pattern of gender practices used to establish, maintain and affirm men’s friendships. The findings of the research demonstrate men’s recreational use of illicit drugs forms part of the social practices of friendship among drug taking men, and men’s understandings of masculinity in turn influence these social practices.

Keywords: Friendship; Masculinities; Men; Drugs; Ireland.

Introduction

Based on empirical sociological research, this article explores how some Irish men’s recreational use of illicit drugs, masculinities and friendship, interconnect. Friendship, as understood here, is relational (Smith, 2012) and involves a ‘set of shared social practices in which certain norms and expectations govern not only the actions, but also the motivations of the friends’ (Digeser, 2013: 35). This article examines men’s drug taking in homosocial contexts as a shared social practice that contributes to men’s friendships. Homosocial settings are understood here, as places where men (or women) congregate for the purpose of pursuing nonsexual interactions with members of their own sex (Bird, 1996). Drawing from in-depth interviews with twenty Irish men who identified as illicit recreational drug users, this article works to demonstrate that some men employ drug taking as a means of forging, maintaining and (re)affirming friendships; the contribution of this article is that it reveals how masculinities are entwined in this nexus. Seminal studies of drug use (Becker, 1953; Young, 1971; Plant, 1975; Zinberg, 1984; Bourgois 1998), from which we derive much of our understanding about social aspects of drug taking, were predominantly of male drug users, conducted by men who, for the most part, overlooked gender in their analysis. In Ireland, where this research was situated a significant aspect of the illicit drug landscape has, until recently, been taken for granted: men’s predominance as a gendered category of illicit drug users (Darcy, 2018).

Whilst some research now reveals aspects of how ‘men’s recreational use of illicit drugs is shaped by men performing masculinities in homosocial contexts’ (Darcy, 2018: 20), little is known about how men’s recreational use of illicit drugs relate to masculinities and men’s friendships. This article seeks to examine this underexplored relationship. For the purposes of this study, recreational drug use is understood as drug taking ‘that occurs for pleasure, typically with friends, in either formal or recreational settings, such as nightclubs, and/or informal settings, such as on the streets and in the home’ (Fletcher et al, 2010: 357). Recreational drug use is

occasional or sporadic, occurring during leisure time and is considered non-problematic by the drug user (Crome et al, 2004).

Within this research, masculinities refer to socially constructed and temporal gendered practices, expectations, expressions or beliefs about men within a particular society. It draws from Connell's (1995) understanding of masculinities and her hegemonic masculinities framework. Connell maintains that masculinities are relational, multiplicitous and unequal, a feature of social structures, which are dependent on cultural context and time, deeply entwined in the nexus of practices between men, and between women and men. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinities are positioned as culturally ascendant and dominant; however, they are 'always contestable' (1995: 76). This creates a dynamic where masculinities compete for position and new hegemonies are constructed. Whereas hegemonic masculinities dominate, other masculinities can become subordinated or marginalised. Connell (1995:71) defines masculinities as 'a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture'. This conceptualisation allows for social aspects of drug taking to be examined through a gender relational lens and it enables us to think about men's drug taking as part of a pattern of gender practices; including the practices that men engage in to establish, maintain and (re)affirm friendships.

Masculinities, Drugs and Friendship

Whilst alcohol, a licit drug, is frequently used as part of symbolic initiations into manhood (Share, 2003; Kimmel, 2008; Leigh & Lee, 2008) and is firmly situated within men's friendship making practices as contributing to male bonding and the maintenance of male friendships (Canaan, 1996; Thurnell-Read, 2012; Emslie et al, 2013); there has been little gendered analysis of men's illicit drug taking practices in terms of friendship making and homosocial bonding. Young people's shared consumption of alcohol is recognised as being deeply intertwined with friendship and peer relations (Room, 1996; MacLean, 2016). For some men, heavy drinking is used to communicate shared understandings of masculinity (Lemle & Mishkind, 1989) and (re)affirm friendship connections and solidarity (Thurnell-Read, 2012). Walker (2001: 367) highlights how 'contemporary ideologies about men's friendships suggest that men's capacity for intimacy is sharply restricted'. However, research by Emslie et al (2013) reveals how drinking enables some men to talk with one another, and how the shared practice of drinking among men is viewed by some as a means of providing social support to peers and improving mood. What is notable here is that men may need alcohol to achieve this. It is evident from the above research that alcohol, masculinities and men's friendships are deeply intertwined. However, connections between men's recreational use of illicit drugs, masculinities and men's friendships are less understood.

Ethnographic research by Ilan (2012) notes how some young Irish men involved in criminality, displayed a 'rugged masculinity', which included the ritualistic use of cannabis to solidify their friendship group (2012: 4). Ilan observes connections between these young men's drug use and their construction of masculine identities. Ilan (2012: 8) contends that 'the young men smoked cannabis with a regularity that approached ritual' and that the 'collective purchasing, possession and consumption of the drug served to underpin their friendship group'. Within this friendship group Ilan (2012: 13) believes drug taking also served as a sort of 'ritualised excitement seeking' that contributed to demonstrating and solidifying friendship bonds. Whilst Ilan points to connections between masculinities, drug taking and friendship, theories used to explain drug use, such as Socialisation Theory, recognise 'the most consistent and reproducible finding in drug research is the strong relationship between an individual's drug behaviour and the concurrent

drug use of his friends' (Kandel, 1980: 269). Other scholars have explored the importance of friendship networks and drug sharing among cannabis users (Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013). Kandel (1980: 270) states 'peer influences are more important at certain points in the process of drug involvement than at others'. Sterk-Elifson and Elifson (1992: 235) examined friendship relations between homeless drug using men, the focus being on 'urban alienation thesis' and the issues of 'pacing', 'binging' and 'controlled' drug use. Whilst research by Belackova and Vaccaro (2013) and Sterk-Elifson and Elifson (1992) highlight the importance of friendship networks and peer influence among drug using groups, such research fails to explicate how masculinities intersect with men's drug use in homosocial friendship groups. Given the importance of peer influence on drug taking practices and the fact that men's friendships are recognised as 'a performance of masculinity' (Migliaccio, 2009), it is possible that shared practices of drug taking within homosocial groups can become incorporated into men's friendship actions and motivations. This article argues that within homosocial friendship groups, men can be socialised into drug taking practices that are understood to have gender meanings that contribute to men's friendships in a multitude of ways. It will be argued that men can collectively construct masculinities and friendships through a shared understanding of symbolic drug taking practices.

Migliaccio (2009: 226) states that men's friendships are complex, more than 'a product of being a man', they are 'a performance of masculinity that is influenced by gendered expectations'. Migliaccio (2009: 227) understands men's friendships as part of a 'performance of masculinity that changes in conjunction with the individuals gendered expectations and how these are presented through interactions with friends'. Some men's friendships are built upon displays of 'physical and mental toughness', what Migliaccio (2009: 228-9) calls a 'stoic performance'. Intimacy between men can be constrained by these expectations and are sometimes achieved covertly; through what Migliaccio (2009: 229) calls 'closeness in the doing'. This entails men affirming friendship connections through 'shared activity, not through self-disclosure' (Migliaccio, 2009: 229). This article examines how, for some men, doing drugs is a means of achieving close friendship with other men.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative methods to explore how masculinities and men's illicit recreational drug use intersect. In the course of this interpretative approach, the study revealed aspects of how men's motivations for drug taking and the meanings ascribed to their drug experiences relate to friendship and friendship making in homosocial contexts. This was an emergent theme that arose from data from a wider project; the original study sought to sociologically explore Irish masculinities and Irish men's perceptions and experiences of drug taking from a gender standpoint (Darcy, 2017). This article draws from twenty in-depth interviews (conducted as part of the wider study), which were carried out with a heterogeneous sample of men residing in the East/South East of Ireland. The participants spanned the social spectrum; there was a rural/urban mix, and varied levels of educational attainment, employment and relationship status. The age profile included eleven participants aged 18-30 years, seven participants aged 31-40 years and two participants aged 41-50 years. There were eighteen participants who identified as White-Irish, one participant identified as Black-Irish (Zen), and one participant identified as White-Irish Traveller (Ollly). Eligibility for inclusion in the study was dependent on participants self-identifying as illicit recreational drug users and declaring that they were not engaged in any form of drug treatment. Participants had to also declare there were no

legal proceedings against them in relation to their illicit drug use. The purpose of the inclusion criteria was to ensure participants identified as recreational drug users and to protect against including drug users who were vulnerable due to addiction. The recruitment of participants included formal and informal methods. Nine participants were recruited by formally writing to community and voluntary organisations that had contact with drug using men and seeking their help to access participants. Another nine participants were recruited informally, through the use of open requests on the researcher's online social network. Two participants were recruited by snowball methods.

Out of the twenty interview participants, eighteen were poly-drug users. Illicit drugs used by the men in this study included: benzodiazepines, crystal meth, cannabis, amphetamines, ketamine, cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, magic mushrooms and a range of new psychoactive substances. Alcohol was frequently consumed along with illegal drugs. Interviews were conducted between September 2015 and March 2016 in a diversity of settings, agreed in advance by participant and researcher. Ethical approval was granted by University College Dublin, Office of Research Ethics, reference HS-14-54-Darcy-OSullivan. In the course of transcribing interviews verbatim, data was de-identified, all place names were changed and participants assigned pseudonyms. It was necessary to shorten some of the extracts, in such cases unessential text was omitted, however, such extracts remain an accurate reflection of what was said by participants. Omitted text is indicated by an ellipsis [...]. Pauses are indicated by ... Narratives that are included in the following sections were chosen based on friendship themes that emerged during analysis and their relevance to this article.

An integral aspect of ensuring high-quality qualitative research involves researcher reflexivity (Robertson, 2006), used in this research as a lens for interrogating the 'subjectivity and role of the researcher in the process of knowledge production' (Day, 2012: 63). The researcher was cognisant that the research method was more than an interaction between participants and researcher. The interviews were 'encounters between men' (Dolan, 2011: 589). Thus what was shared during the interviews was influenced by the researcher's position as both researcher and someone who identified as being masculine. On appearance, the researcher is a white-haired, middle-aged, heavy set, middle class, heterosexual, married, able-bodied, white Irish man. In actuality, the researcher is the eldest in a family of three, who until their mid-teens, lived in an area of significant social and economic deprivation on the East coast of Ireland. Growing up in a matriarchal single parent family, the researcher spent much of his youth in the company of grandmothers, mother, aunts, sisters and female cousins. There was a scarcity of good male role models, and he regularly witnessed drug dealing and drug use in the estate where he lived. The researcher's life history has undoubtedly influenced his research interests and in this regard has played a role in this process of knowledge production.

The findings presented in this article are divided into three sections. The first section, 'Drug Taking with Friends' examines men's drug initiations and how drug use underpinned friendship bonds between drug taking men. This section highlights how men's friendships gave meaning to shared drug taking in homosocial contexts. The second section, 'Drug Taking, Emotional Talk and Men's Closeness' explores how drug taking and drug intoxication facilitated men's emotional talk and enabled temporary expressions of intimacy between heterosexual men. The final findings section, 'Friendships and Maturing In and Out of Drug Taking' explores how life course position, peer influence, and men's friendships shaped men's drug taking practices (and vice versa).

Findings

Drug Taking With Friends

The majority of the twenty men in this study drifted into drug taking. For all but two, it was an unplanned experience. Motivated by curiosity and or the encouragement of other men, novices began with an experimental pattern of drug taking in the presence of other men like them (from similar locations, social class, age and with similar inclinations toward drug taking). During initiations, drugs were freely shared:

[...] it's not that they offered, it's just say "does anyone want a drag?" [right] they don't say "does anyone want to do" like they wouldn't put it in your face, they'd just say "anyone want it, it's there" could just leave it down [yeah] and whether people picks it up or not, that's the way it went like. (Lou, 20)

The offering of drugs freely, was interpreted by the men as a token of friendship, solidarity and affiliation. Importantly, it was within the context of friendships that the participants began their drug taking histories, and became practiced drug takers:

Me and my friend Nick started smoking together, he was a year below me and he already smoked weed, he'd been smoking since he was about twelve and eh, we eh, we just started smoking weed every weekend, like we'd try get money for it and then we did that for months and months and months, and then it came to third year like and we'd be getting it like everyday nearly. (Eric, 18)

For Eric, his initiation into drug taking with his friend Nick represented an important development in their friendship. The shared practice of drug taking marked a new phase of togetherness for the two men. For Eric, this drug journey was a shared one and it became a testament of their closeness and affinity. Their progression as drug takers illustrates how some men underpinned friendships and achieved closeness by doing drugs together. This resonates with Ilan's (2012) research, mentioned earlier, where the shared rituals surrounding young men's cannabis use were used to underpin friendship groups. For other participants in this research, when in homosocial contexts, drug taking was a social leveller and drug possession a social elevator. The shared social practice of drug taking can function as a social leveller, whereas being in possession of drugs and supplying them to others (freely or not) can be perceived within drug taking groups as affording an elevated position. Whilst Sam states doing drugs was often about inclusion and mimicking the behaviours of older peers, supplying drugs to others afforded a different dynamic. Sam states he was covert when in possession of drugs (implicit here is his ability to supply others); whilst others may have bragged about it he did not, however being secretly in possession of enough drugs to supply others elevated him above other men in his view:

Me it's just, just to socialise, just having fun with your friends like, you know what I mean. But some are just, don't know it's kind of a "every lads doing it, the older lads are doing it, I'm going to do it, sit here with the older lads and do it" like, just kind of. Not so much peer pressure, no one is telling them to do them, forcing them into it, it's just someone think they're a big deal doing it, do you know what I mean. I'm the lad that has the drugs at the party or whatever do you know. I just, I keep it close to me chest. (Sam, 20)

Within drug taking contexts, Sam's possession of drugs and ability to supply others placed him in an elevated position; it was a 'big deal' to those looking to take drugs. Among drug taking men being a 'big deal' was equated with being a 'big man' and this appears to have contributed to Sam's motivation for keeping drugs in his possession. Being a 'big man' ensured Sam was communicating messages about his masculinity that resonated hegemonic expressions of masculinity – strong, dominant and in control (Connell, 1995). Being a supplier secured Sam's position among his friends.

Devere (2014: 1) states that 'friendships can range from close to cordial, from affinity to rapport'. In this study, male dyads were especially conducive to expressions of closeness when engaged in the shared pursuit of drug intoxication. The findings presented here suggest that homosocial contexts facilitated covert expressions of closeness and affection between male friends. In this regard, shared drug taking between men was understood as part of a collective expression of masculinity that contributed to men's closeness. Some men viewed drug taking as a bonding experience between larger groups that affirmed friendship ties:

[...] the next day you mightn't even known what you were laughing at, you know so. But at the time, but you can still remember that it was hilarious, so it's very hard to explain but I suppose that was probably the best. You're with your ten closest mates, your you know, your good friends and everyone's kind of in the same boat and doing it [...] (Jay, 31)

Jay clearly distinguishes the men above as his 'closest mates', indicating that the experience of drug intoxication was enhanced by the fact it was shared with close friends, rather than acquaintances or strangers. Implicit within Jay's account is the trust placed in the other men and a sense of *communitas* surrounding shared intoxication. This is echoed in another participant's account, where he describes a drug taking experience with his 'best' mate:

[...] it's probably my cousin, who is one of my best mates, eh that I've known since we were born, well since he was born obviously. Eh I started hanging around with him and this group [...] there was about seven or eight of us, as I said we were just, we just planned to have a few cans and watch the match and it just escalated [they took ecstasy together] like and eh had like at seven or eight in the morning we were all still up and we were trying to find more drink in the house and that kind of thing, it was one of those nights (laughs). Just a random thing and eh that was the first time I really have a strong memory of how I felt and like how everybody around me was feeling the same thing [...] the hangover wasn't really as bad as to what I've done other times. 'Cause

everybody was just kind of texting each other saying “oh how do you feel?” (laughs) “how do you feel?” and I was just kind of funny [yeah] we were just but yeah. So that time was very positive like. (Dan, 27)

The significance of Dan’s drug experience is that fact it was a shared experience within a homosocial group that contributed to group solidarity. Comparisons of how the men were feeling during and after drug intoxication served to affirm connection and affiliation. For Dan and Jay, their shared drug taking served to unify their friendship groups and (re)affirm friendship connections. These findings help highlight that while some men used illicit drugs to communicate messages about masculine friendship, in turn, it is the gendered dimensions of men’s friendships that gives meaning to shared drug taking in homosocial contexts.

Men’s drug intoxication facilitated covert expressions of closeness, through what Oliffe and Thorne (2007: 150) describe as ‘reciprocal assistance’, involving shared activities and behaviours. In this way, the shared practice of drug taking, drug intoxicated behaviours and comparisons of drug experiences enable these men to reciprocate understandings of masculinities and friendship in homosocial contexts. Seventeen out of the twenty interview participants expressed an increased sense of connection and affinity to male peers whilst doing drugs. The other three men did not express any explicit increased sense of connection to male peers as a result of drug taking. This may be explained by the fact these men were more solitary in their drug use, often using on their own or with a romantic partner. Based on these findings, it appears shared drug use within dyads allowed for a different type of intimacy between heterosexual men, compared to shared drug taking in larger groups, which served to reinforce and demonstrate collective solidarity. Oliffe & Thorne (2007: 150) contend that men’s friendships are ‘constructed in relation to culturally informed masculine ideals’, which in the Irish context can inhibit some men’s expression of emotion (Cleary, 2012). In this way, men’s drug taking can be viewed as both a product of, and a solution to, an internalised masculinity ideology that constrains their emotional interaction with other men. This is important in understanding some men’s motivation for drug taking, and how men’s drug use relates to masculinities and men’s friendships: it can allow men to feel close to other men and excuse behaviours that might otherwise be inhibited. The following section explores this in more detail.

Drug Taking, Emotional Talk and Men’s Closeness

Cleary (2012: 503) states that men often use drugs and/or alcohol as an emotional analgesic when trying to deal with ‘emotional pain and stressful events’. Similarly, participants in Dolan’s (2011) research attempted to escape the hardship of economic disadvantage through heavy drinking and/or drug use. This study found that some men used drugs for comparable reasons; at other times however, men’s shared drug taking was a symbolic gesture of support, which facilitated emotional talk and allowed men to feel closer to male friends. In parallel, Emsile et al (2013) discovered that some men perceived drinking with friends as helpful in facilitating emotional talk and providing support. Whilst the focus of this article is on men, it is important to note that women can also bond over shared alcohol consumption (Nicholls, 2016). The following excerpt from Ron provides an example of how men can bond using illicit drugs. Ron is a young man with little education, who has experienced a significant amount of hardship in his short years. During the interview he spoke about a friend of his, who was taking benzodiazepines (prescription

sedatives) for non-medical reasons. Ron believed his friends' drug use contributed to the following event. Ron received a call late one night from a male friend in distress; fearing his friend was suicidal, Ron went to see him:

[...] you're thinking about doing something stupid like killing yourself. But like you're getting that feeling because you need them, you know like, because you're addicted to them [yeah]. So I walked up there one day [to a friend's house] 'cause, you know he's me mate. Just because it was the tablets like, you know like, he was going to kill himself that night like [...] five in the morning and I walked out to [...] make sure he was alright. I had a bit of weed (cannabis) there, I smoked it with him, anyway, you know to make him feel a bit better. He went into his gaff you know anyway, he woke up you know like, the whole way home you know like he start crying to me and all [...] He was like "man like you don't understand like how much I appreciate this like, thanks" you know what I mean he was like [yeah]. You know just it felt good doing that to me mate, but I knew it was the tablets that were making him do it [...] (Ron, 18).

This situation had a significant impact on Ron, who at the time of interviewing was coping with considerable personal difficulties himself. The importance of this event for Ron was that he had been able to communicate support for his friend through action and by doing so had averted tragedy. It was the action of sharing of a cannabis joint between the two young men that had become a symbolic gesture of friendship and support to Ron. In his view, the sharing of cannabis communicated support and asserted their friendship bond. It communicated to his distressed friend that he was there for him, becoming a covert expression of intimacy between the two; an example of 'closeness in the doing' (Migliaccio, 2009: 229). It facilitated emotional talk between them, and provided the opportunity for them to express closeness and gratitude for each other's friendship.

Whilst conventional Western ideas about masculinity perpetuate the notion that men must exert restraint and suppress emotion (Connell, 1995; Cleary, 2012), some men in this study allowed themselves to express emotions toward other men when high on drugs. In this way, men's drug intoxication allowed them to temporarily contravene conventional masculine stereotypes, those which compel men to abstain from emotional displays and to hide any weakness/vulnerability (Connell, 1995). However, what was significant in this study is that men appeared to need drugs in order to tell their friends they loved them. Ecstasy was one drug that could assist in this regard:

[...] you love everyone [...] and everyone loves you [...] if I was with my friends and we're out on ecstasy and we're sitting there I'd be like telling him I love him and he's my best friend and then the next morning I'd be like (laughs) you know, call him a prick or whatever like, so yeah, you'd react very differently. (Fan, 37)

Fan's intoxication from ecstasy allowed him to express love within the boundaries of conventional heterosexual friendship. Ecstasy enabled Fan to tell his friend he loved him and intoxication exonerated the transgression. Such displays were temporary and in Fan's case only

occurred when intoxicated with ecstasy. Once the affect of the drug wore off, conventional rules of interaction between the heterosexual friends resumed. Fan reasserted his masculinity and repositioned himself toward his male peer by calling him 'a prick', thus re-establishing conventional rules of heterosexual behaviour between them.

Thus far, this article has examined how men's drug taking was used as a shared social practice for establishing, maintaining and (re)affirming friendships. The following section examines how friendships, peer influence and maturation influenced shared drug taking practices.

Friendships and Maturing In and Out of Drug Taking

Engaging in drug taking, in and of itself, does not accomplish masculinities nor establish friendship. In order for drug taking to relate to masculinities and friendships, the drug taking must be shared, observed, then understood and interpreted as having symbolic meaning. It is through symbolic interaction that men's drug taking and intoxicated actions intersect with masculinities and men's friendships. The research participants belonged to a variety of friendship groups and dyads, and often drifted fluidly between these. In the same way men 'drifted' between friendships, a 'motion guided gently by underlying influences' (Matza, 1964: 29), men also drifted or matured, in and out of drug taking. Drifting was caused by a variety of factors, such as, positive or negative drug taking experiences, men aging, changes in relationship status, education, work and family life.

For the men in this study, their drug taking was homophilic in character. Homophilic is understood here, as the tendency for individuals to gravitate toward those who are similar to them in terms of age, gender, race and socio-economic status and who display similar attitudes toward illicit recreational drug use (Kandel, 1980). The opinions of friends weighed heavily in shaping men's drug taking practices. As friends drifted in and out of drug taking, others often followed suit, and vice versa. Collectively, friendship groups developed a variety of drug taking practices based on their socio-economic status and life course position. For example, younger men with less access to money and resources often pooled money together to purchase drugs. When money was scarce, participants such as Sam, Ron and Rez would get drugs on credit ('on lay'). At times these young men accrued considerable debts. For the young men who pooled money together to purchase drugs, 'going half's on a bag [of weed]' (Ron, 18), became a communicative act of solidarity and closeness.

Highlighting the complexity of friendship influences on drug taking practices, Ron provided an example of how his drug taking was influenced by a close friend whom he viewed like a brother. As this friend had drifted out of drug taking, Ron had followed suit. However, Ron secretly had failed in his abstinence and progressed onto using other illicit drugs. He was fearful of this friend becoming aware of the extent of his drug taking:

'Cause me mate I was telling you there is like a brother. After he stopped smoking joints you know I stopped smoking them at the same time. You know what I mean like [...] for ages when I started back smoking joints, I didn't tell him you know 'cause I thought like he'd box the face off me [yeah]. He found out. He said 'man this is disappointing, you shouldn't have did that' but he doesn't know like I did any other drugs, if he ever found out, I know for a fact he'd box the face off me. You know like I couldn't do anything in front of him [right]. But any other of me mates I'd be grand yeah' (Ron, 18)

It is clear Ron has a significant friendship connection to this other man. He cared considerably about his opinion of him and feared his disapproval. Ron's secretive drug taking jeopardised this friendship. He believed his continued drug taking was symbolically an act of division, disloyalty and weakness. This was his reason for hiding his transgression; being found out risked both disappointment and physical conflict. Crucially, in the eyes of this brotherly figure, Ron's position as a friend and as a man was at risk by his continued drug use. Ron was not the only participant to hide his drug taking practices from friends and recreational drug taking was not without risk. For some other participants, what had begun as recreational had become problematic and was leading to addiction:

I had got to a stage where I couldn't even go out for a night with friends, you know for a drink without having a bag of coke in my back pocket. So you know I could go down to the loo and a line a coke like was normal, it was abnormal not to, to just have drink on a night out. (Tim, 45)

For Ron and Tim, their friendships influenced their drug taking practices. However, as drug taking men aged and they perceive themselves as maturing, their drug taking practices changed, as Mack illustrates:

[...] partly, to with friends being in different places in their life. [...] when I left Spain, I was like, ok now I'll stop smoking weed everyday and this was the last day I smoked, well maybe I smoked once or twice since then but never, I haven't smoked in Ireland. So I think, I went through a different phases with different drugs and it kinda just trailed off. And then the last seven years it's been a lot more calm I'd say. (Mack, 37)

Some men drifted away from drug taking friendships and matured out of their recreational drug use. Maturing out of drug taking was related to assuming new roles and conforming to conventional expectations of masculinities, based on age and life course position. Perceptions of friendships often shifted as men matured out of drug taking:

[...] I suppose I just grew up out of them as well [...] you could see the other lads as well em going down the road doing the other drugs and I just didn't want to go down that road as well [...] I never smoked or anything like that and I was always then really focused [...] but that's not, I don't think that's the reason I just didn't want to either. And I suppose I saw all the other guys going down the other road trying out all the other drugs so I don't know maybe I got scared that if I kept doing the weed I'd want to go down that road too [...] because I'd probably say I have an addictive personality as well like if, cuz when I did that bucket bong the first time I think I probably did one every weekend (laughs) for about two months. Em, so yeah if I, if I get into something like it I'd probably end up going down that road [ok]. So, yeah, it's, it's a weird one but I suppose

growing up and em obviously I'm with a girl now who has never even taken a drug whatsoever [...]. (Jay, 31)

Men's drifting in and out of drug taking friendships highlights how individuals tend to be homophilic, gravitating to those with similar interests and beliefs (Kandel, 1980). Men who were no longer actively using drugs or who were using less at the time of interviewing, recalled how their drug use waned as their drug taking preferences and life circumstances changed. Tor provides an example:

Well actually the trajectory has probably been somewhat similar. Em, like I said [...] the lad from William Island, he has, well he has his own family now and I know that he uses very much less than he used to. I use hugely less than I used to. Em, Collin, the father of my godchild uses a lot less than he used to. Em, pretty much everyone I know uses a lot less than they used to. But you grow up, you get responsibilities, you don't have time to, to pursue the hobbies that you used to when you were. You know if it's remote control cars or drugs, it doesn't matter; you don't have time for it. (Tor, 40)

Not all men in this study matured out of drug taking. Fourteen of the active drug takers in this study believed they had matured into controlled drug takers. In their view, they were experienced drug users and this appeared to afford them a sense of ascendancy over less experienced drug takers. These men placed value in their perceived degree of control exerted whilst intoxicated. They viewed this as being related to having aged and having accumulated drug taking experience. Crucially however, these men remained social drug takers and maintained friendships with other drug taking men.

Discussion and Limitations

Digester (2013: 35) contends that 'practices of friendship are diverse, historically contingent and adverbial in character'; what this article set out to do was reveal men's recreational use of illicit drugs as a practice of friendship. The contribution of this article is that it has revealed men's recreational use of illicit drugs forms part of the social practices of friendship among drug taking men, and men's understanding of masculinity in turn influences some of these social practices. For the men in this study, shared drug taking was a tool for establishing, maintaining and (re)affirming friendships with other drug taking men. The communicative property of illicit drugs becomes visible in the context of men's friendship making practices. Drugs were tools some men in this study utilised as part of interactions for building connections with other drug taking men, and in turn this shaped some of the meanings men ascribed to drugs and drug taking.

This article has revealed how the shared practice of drug taking can enable different degrees of friendship intimacy depending on whether the drug taking was within a dyad or group. Within dyads shared drug taking can contribute to a deeper sense of closeness and more explicit expressions of affection between heterosexual men; where as, within groups the shared practice of drug taking tended to reinforce and demonstrate collective expressions of masculine solidarity and affinity. The article has worked to demonstrate that the offering of drugs between drug

taking men functioned as a signifier of friendship. The shared practices involved in men's drug taking were related to collective understandings of how to do friendship, within the context of masculinities being 'a place in gender relations' (Connell, 1995: 71). In this way, men's shared drug taking creates a temporary space where gender relations, drug taking and friendship converge. Men's use of illicit drugs to communicate messages about friendships and their masculinity would not be possible without shared understanding of drug taking motivations and actions. 'Mutual recognition' is an essential component of friendship (Digeser, 2013: 50). The men in this study interpreted the offering of drugs and shared action of drug taking as signifiers of friendship, affiliation and masculine bonds. On one hand it is unsurprising that some Irish men use drugs in this way, given the prevailing culture of Irish society broadly regards the offering and sharing of alcohol as a signifier of solidarity, conviviality and friendship (Kearns, 1997; Barich, 2001). On the other hand discovering that Irish men use some illicit drugs in similar ways to alcohol is novel.

This research drew from the literature on masculinities and alcohol as a starting point, noting how masculinities, men's friendships and men's alcohol consumption are entwined in many Western societies. On the surface this research reveals there are a number of similarities between the way men use alcohol and the way they use illicit drugs to establish, maintain and (re)affirm friendships with other men. Despite these parallels, the drug taking men in this study differentiated between alcohol use/intoxication and drug use/intoxication. Whilst there were similarities in what alcohol/drug intoxication enabled men to do in terms of friendship, these states of being held different meaning (Darcy, 2017). To drug taking men, taking drugs was different to drinking, despite both often occurring at the same time and despite both sharing some similar social functions (for example, as a social leveller in homosocial settings).

Within homosocial contexts drug taking men can use drugs to establish, maintain and (re)affirm friendships in much the same way men might use alcohol. However, it is important to emphasise that drug intoxication is not an identical state of being to drunkenness. There are marked differences in sensation, meaning, experience and risk. Fundamentally there are differences in how they are understood by men as relating to masculinities (Darcy, 2018). Whilst men's drug taking and alcohol consumption can be used instrumentally as part of friendship practices, how drug taking and alcohol relate to masculinities differs depending on context. Illicit drugs by their illegality are generally hidden from public view and therefore restricted to contexts where their use is accepted or tolerated. They are more often used among groups where meanings are shared, understood and specific to that location. In Western societies, alcohol can be used openly to establish, maintain and (re)affirm friendship (by men or women); however, when illicit drug use occurs outside of drug taking contexts its gendered meaning changes significantly. This is a central difference between illicit drugs and alcohol. Illicit drug use might be viewed as being masculine in a drug taking context, however, outside of this it could be viewed as emasculating and socially iniquitous (Darcy, 2018). This does not occur to the same extent with alcohol. Socially, the meanings ascribed to alcohol are broadly understood and accepted in Western societies. This is not to suggest the meanings ascribed to alcohol are not context dependent, they are. For example, were alcohol to be consumed in the workplace or whilst caring for children it would be viewed differently to when used in a social context.

In sum, the contribution of this article to the wider field of friendship studies and to this journal is that, it has explored friendship practices that occur alongside a social activity, which is typically hidden from public view. In this way, this research builds upon others who work toward 'exploring and explaining friendship ... the bonds between person and person, and group and group' (Smith, 2013), albeit the focus here was on a particular group of men. However, this article helps understand the 'extraordinary and diverse forms' that friendship can take (Digeser,

2013: 34). This article has shone a light on how drug taking can be used by some men as part of a set of social practices to form, maintain and/or (re)affirm friendship bonds. However, this requires that drug taking men learn and subscribe to a shared understanding and interpretation of drug taking and drug intoxication as an expression of masculine friendship. This research has also provided an alternative way of looking at men's drug taking and has worked to demonstrate how men's friendships gives meaning to men's drug taking.

Whilst this study has uncovered connections between men's recreational use of illicit drugs, masculinities and men's friendships, a number of limitations should be noted. This is a small-scale study; limited by its sample size, geographic confines and the analytic lens employed. Building on this study, it would be useful to conduct comparative research on a larger scale exploring how men's recreational use of illicit drugs, masculinities and friendship interconnect across geographic locations. As this research only explored men's recreational use of illicit drugs it was not possible in this article to make comparisons of how drug taking relates to male/male friendship versus male/female friendship. Therefore, future research is warranted examining women's recreational use of illicit drugs from a gender perspective, and the drug taking practices within mixed sex friendship groups, in order, to make comparisons of how drug taking, as a gendered practice, relates to friendships for men and women in homosocial and heterosocial settings.

About the author: Dr Clay Darcy is an independent scholar who completed his doctoral research at the School of Sociology, University College Dublin, Ireland. His PhD thesis entitled 'Here are the drug takers: men, masculinities and illicit recreational drug use' explored Irish men's views on, and experiences of, illicit recreational drug use and examined how men use illicit drugs as symbolic social objects to communicate messages about their masculine identity. Prior to studying sociology, Clay spent time working within the education sector and visual arts. He currently works as a drug education specialist for a large voluntary organization in Ireland.

Email: claydarcy@gmail.com

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