Author's response to reviews

Title: Reasons for not using ecstasy: a qualitative study of non-users, experimental users and ex-users

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Version: 2 Date: 24 December 2011

Author's response to reviews: see over
Reviewer's report

Title: Reasons for not using ecstasy: a qualitative study of non-users, experimental users and ex-users

Version: 1 Date: 6 November 2011

Reviewer: Gjalt-Jorn Ygram Peters

Reviewer's report:

This paper describes a qualitative study in Sao Paulo among non-users, experimental ex-users, and regular ex-users of ecstasy. Reasons for not starting to use and for ceasing use were examined and are discussed and thoroughly related to the literature. The issues addressed by this study are still largely understudied, and this paper thus represents a valuable contribution to the literature. The authors chose an appropriate method (qualitative research) and described their methods with sufficient rigour. Their results contribute to our understanding of the dynamics underlying why young people start ecstasy use (or better, why those who don't, don't) and why they cease ecstasy use, and these results are thoroughly discussed.

The paper is well written, although I would advise that a native speaker reads the paper. I am not, but I had the impression that there were some errors. Since I am not a native speaker, I do not feel qualified to review the paper regarding the use of English.

- The article was translated and also revised by AJE (the certificate is attached).

I have listed a number of minor and discretionary revisions.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS

Page 4, last paragraph, first sentence ("another [...] use"): there appears to be one 'information' too many?

- The word “information” was removed
Page 5, second paragraph, second sentence ("however [...] drug"): some words seem to have disappeared just after "where the drug".

- We inserted "is used".

Page 5, first paragraph under heading "Methods" ("Qualitative research references were used"): I am not sure what you mean here. It could be me of course, but then there will probably be others who also fail to understand this. I am not clear on what you mean by these references, and how they were used exactly. Do you mean that you did not use grounded theory, but rather were guided by the state of the literature in your collecting of the data and the analyses? Could you explain what you mean here and how it influenced your data collection and/or analyses?

- We altered the sentence to: "Qualitative research procedures were used. According to Peters and Kok, such procedures have been useful for studies on discontinuing ecstasy use, as they allow for greater understanding of the phenomenon."

Page 6, paragraph about Ex-users: you define ex-users as users who used ecstasy 6 or more times; but then explain that this cutoff point was based on a study where this group was defined as people who used ecstasy 5 or more times?

- We included: "The cutoff point was based on qualitative studies that have defined these specific drug users as people who have used ecstasy five or more times [20]."

Page 6, lines 18-20 ("eight [...] festivals"): with 'participant observations', do you mean recruitment? If not, what exactly was observed? Does this mean that another method of data collection than interviews was used?

- We included: "Eight participant observations were also conducted in contexts where usage was most likely, such as parties and electronic music festivals."
The parties were open to the general public, and the author knew about them through the Internet. The observation of participants was not used for recruiting, but rather to make the interviewer more acquainted with the context the interviewees were already familiar with. Those observations also favored the insertion of the author in the electronic scene, which later facilitated her contact with the interviewees.

Page 8, line 4: you mention a pilot study, but this is the first time you mention this. Did you perhaps mean something else? Also, what exactly was the role of these other senior researchers? Do you means that you discussed the analysis with other researchers so as to use their experience to optimize the process? If so, I did not get this from the text. If you meant something else, I didn't get that, either, I'm afraid . . .

- We explained what we meant by pilot study in the beginning of the methodology session (an extra paragraph). We also explained the functions of the senior researchers: "They made suggestions to improve the pilot interview and made it possible for the data to be triangulated after the collection. In other words, based on their experience with other qualitative studies, they evaluated coding and categorization adequacy."

Page 9, first sentence: almost all users reported using tobacco -> in the Netherlands, such a high proportion of smokers might be considered worrying, as it would be considerably higher than the proportion of smokers at, for example, dance events. Is such a high proportion of smokers normal in Sao Paulo, or might it indicate that you have a select sample (one of the risks of snowball sampling)?

- We included: "The average age of our sample group was slightly higher than the average found in most studies of ecstasy. The prevalence of tobacco use was also higher than in other Brazilian youth samples. These characteristics deserve attention in the interpretation of results."

Page 9, second paragraph, seventh line: with 'the study group', do you mean your entire sample, or the ex-users (and could you make this explicit in the text)?
"The three groups reported the electronic music scene as the main context where they used ecstasy or had the opportunity to use ecstasy."

Page 10, fourth line: the participant acronym isn't right: seems to contain an "s" that shouldn't be there, according to your explanation on page 7. Also, this is a non-user citing a micareta party as a venue for potential use; whereas earlier you explained that ex-users who reported this type of venue?

- We altered the sentence: "The NU reported having had the opportunity to experiment with the drug in many different parties."

Page 12, first sentence: 'EX' should be 'EXP', I guess?

- EX-US (ex-users).

Page 16, second paragraph, first sentence: I thought that finding non-users was hardest (methods section)? I can imagine people in both groups were hard to find of course; in any case, please make sure this is clear at both points in the paper.

- We inserted: "it was very difficult to find people who had not experienced ecstasy after having an opportunity to use it"

Page 16, second paragraph, second sentence: you don't explain which implications this higher age may have?

Page 21, first sentence: this same review by Peters et al. points out that influencing correct positive beliefs does not seem a wise intervention strategy. After all, such an intervention would have to spread untrue information. This would most likely result in substantially lowering the trust of the target population in such communications. Therefore, I am not sure whether suggesting to address the positive effects of ecstasy is a good idea. Of course, providing information about potential negative effects seems a good idea, but there are two considerations that should be kept in mind. First, since ecstasy generally does not have many acute negative effects, one would have to be very careful about
one's phrasing. Second, such an intervention could only work to discourage ecstasy use, as ecstasy users who do not have a high self-efficacy to cease use will likely process such a communication defensively (e.g. Ruiter, Abraham & Kok, 2001, Psychology & Health). This also touched upon the issue of impurity of pills sold as ecstasy. Of course, pills contaminated with other active ingredients than MDMA, or pills exclusively containing other ingredients, are more likely to have undesired effects. This may provide a useful avenue for interventions.

- Explained in the discussion: “One should bear in mind that the negative effects of the drug might be associated with contaminated pills. A study with chromatography was performed with 25 different batches of the drug and found MDMA variations from 30.9 to 92.7 mg. Therefore, this kind of information might be a strategy so that non-users of ecstasy are discouraged from experimenting with it, while for the users it is information that should be taken into account when using the drug"[481]. It is not allowed to test the pills in Brazil, which makes it difficult to know what the pills are made of.”

- Page 21, second paragraph: I do not understand the logic here. Why does that fact that the participants used the internet and peers to acquire information imply that information enhances risk? It's possible that ecstasy users, perhaps even very heavy ecstasy users, also used the internet and peers to acquire information?

- Explained in the discussion “Most respondents reported that they obtain information about positive and negative effects of the drug through the Internet and/or users. This response suggested that information enhances perception of risk, and young individuals are searching for further information of the drug, possibly because the media has already reported deaths associated with the consumption of this drug.”

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

Page 3, third paragraph ("Most investigative [...] other users"): perhaps also include information about the relevance of electronic music, not just the social context? (for example, "Dancestasy": dance and MDMA use in Dutch youth culture.", ter Bogt et al, 2002, Contemporary Drug problems)
We inserted: “These events are attended by young adults and are characterized by the presence of electronic music and colorful decor[4,5]. Those venues usually have areas where people can dance, talk and rest. Participants go there to have fun, most of the time in groups. Some authors studied the history of the electronic scene, and observed that the use of ecstasy is closely related to parties, since participants reported that dancing under the effect of ecstasy is more pleasant, and that the main effect of the drug is to cause empathy.”

Page 6, paragraph about Experimental Users: experimental users are defined as users who used ecstasy 1-4 times, where the last use occasion was over one year ago at time of recruitment. When I read this at first, I thought this was a mistake, and it should have said that their last use occasion should have been within one year. Later, I discovered that experimental users seem to be ex-users as well. This is not clear. If indeed 'experimental users' are also ex-users, just ex-users who used less intensively, perhaps consider renaming them to reflect that status (e.g. 'ex-experimental users', or 'light ex-users' and 'heavy ex-users' (for the other ex-users group))? 

- We included: “Sterk et al (2007) define users as individuals who made use of the drug ten times or more.”

Page 6, line 14: how many initial participants (i.e. selected, not snowballed, participants) did you use, and from which contexts (you list three (academic, artistic, medical): were there more, and if so, which?

- We altered the sentence to: “Respondents of different professions (lawyer, psychologist, musician, engineer, sales representative, etc.) were approached from different contexts (academic, artistic, medical, festive and others) and from key informants, such as party promoters, DJs and regular attendees of raves, who had special knowledge about the study population”

Page 6, line 18: ‘could’ -> I’m not a native speaker, but shouldn't this be 'can'?

- We inserted the word “can”.

Page 9, second paragraph, third line: “the ex-users reported that they used the
drug at [...]” -> don't you mean "had used"? ("used" implies that they still do)

  - We inserted the word: “Prior use.”

Page 11, first paraph under heading "Adverse effects": this paragraph made me realise that some participants may not have used 3,4-methylidioximethamphetamine (MDMA), but another substance, sold as ecstasy. Is known what proportion of the pills sold as ecstasy in Sao Paulo actually contain MDMA?)?

  - Studies are scarce in Brazil. However, we found one that reported the amount of MDMA present in the pills varies greatly. Additionally, many groups that work with harm reduction still do not have permission to test the pills at parties.

  - We included: “One should bear in mind that the negative effects of the drug might be associated with contaminated pills. A study with chromatography was performed with 25 different batches of the drug and found MDMA variations from 30.9 to 92.7 mg. Therefore, this kind of information might be a strategy so that non-users of ecstasy are discouraged from experimenting with it, while for the users it is information that should be taken into account when using the drug[45]. “It is not allowed to test those pills at parties in Brazil, which makes it difficult to know what they are made of”.

Page 14, last paragraph: Could you maybe rewrite that a bit? As it is, it's not clear to me which contrast is signified by the "however" that opens the paragraph; I don't understand how people in the NU group can have used experimented with ecstasy (as this group is defined as people who never consumed ecstasy); and why the fact that one participant indicated that he'd be willing to switch to ecstasy if he wouldn't have access to his drug of choice contrasts with the fact that most non-users didn't want to try ecstasy - after all, this guy also didn't want to try ecstasy, right?

  - We included: “However, most of the interviewees in the NU group reported that they would not experiment with ecstasy if they were in a context of drug use, except for an interviewee, who said she would use that drug in case she did not have her drug of choice (marijuana). In the EXP group, most of the interviewees reported they would not use ecstasy again.”
Page 15, last quote: I assume 'bullet' is Portuguese slang for ecstasy; if so, maybe explain this (e.g. using brackets in the quote), or if not, what is this?

- *Bala (candy, in English) is a slang for ecstasy*

Page 17, third paragraph, last sentence: you mention classical conditioning as a theory that can be used to understand the use of ecstasy in specific contexts. Could you elaborate a bit more on the implications of this theory in this situation? Does it yield insights that can be beneficial to intervention development? Ah, I now see that you do this two paragraphs further. Perhaps consider omitting this sentence from this paragraph. Both this paragraph and the next one deal with contextual effects, so it seems natural to go more in depth after that (without the need to already mention conditioning half way through).

- We changed the place of the paragraph that talked about conditioning and put it immediately after the one that discussed the context of use.

Page 17, last paragraph, last sentences: could you relate the findings of Falck et al. to your own findings? As it is, they're kind of disconnected from the rest of the paragraph.

- We altered the paragraph: "Falck et al. studied 304 ex-ecstasy users (18 to 30 years old) who answered questions about resuming use of the drug. The responses were: 'no', 8.3%; 'probably not', 16.2%; 'did not know', 15.8%; 'probably', 37.3%; and 'definitely yes', 22.4% [29]. This prevalence suggests that ex-users of ecstasy tend to want to use the drug again. Therefore, behavioral models of dependence should be taken into account in association with the context of use."

Page 20, second paragraph: it's not clear what you mean by vulnerability and sensations. Does vulnerability mean that less positive, and more negative effects were experienced? Or that more positive effects were experienced? Or both more positive and more negative effects?

- We inserted "negative effects"
Reviewer's report

Title: Reasons for not using ecstasy: a qualitative study of non-users, experimental users and ex-users

Version: 1 Date: 11 November 2011

Reviewer: Elyse Singer

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions: None

Minor Essential revisions:

1.) In the background section in paragraph 7 there are words missing in the sentence that begins: “However, this study did not elucidate whether...”. It should read: “However, this study did not elucidate whether the opportunity to use was only characterized by the fact that individuals had been in a context where the drug was present or whether they had been directly offered the drug.”

- We inserted the following explanation: “However, this study did not elucidate whether the opportunity to use was only characterized by the fact that the individuals had been in a context where the drug whether they had been offered the drug.”

2.) Is it true that no studies have been conducted on experimental Ecstasy users? This is claimed in paragraph 7 of the background section. Perhaps you might say few studies.
We altered the paragraph: “Another information gap involves the segment of the public who has never used ecstasy or who did not advance past experimental use. Although 1.9% of college students in Brazil proclaimed recent use (last 30 days), 92.5% reported never using ecstasy, while 4.4% had used it in their lifetime but not within the last year.”

3.) In the Methods section under “participants,” The second sentence in paragraph one is confusing. It might read: “The sample group......without evidence of cognitive or psychiatric impairment who were able to complete the interview.”

- We rephrased the sentence to: “The sample group consisted of individuals over 18 years, without cognitive impairment or evident psychiatric disorder that could bias the interview content”.

4.) In the methods section after the three groups of users are defined, a new paragraph should begin with the sentence that reads: “Between 2009 and 2010....” In this sample paragraph it should be noted that “snowball” sampling is a recruiting method that taps into the social networks of participants. This paragraph should also answer how researchers gained access to parties in which participant observation took place. Were these public/private parties?

- We included: “Eight participant observations were also conducted in contexts where usage was most likely, such as parties and electronic music festivals. The parties were open to the general public, and the author knew about them through the internet. The observation of participants was not used for recruiting, but rather to make the interviewer more acquainted with the context the interviewees were already familiar with. Those observations also favored the insertion of the author in the electronic scene, which later facilitated her contact with the interviewees”

5.) In the section labeled “Changes in Lifestyle and Expected Future use,” the first sentence of paragraph two which begins “However, these respondents answered.....” is confusing. How could non-users answer from the perspective of experimental use if they’ve never used?

- We inserted: “However, most of the interviewees in the NU group reported that they would not experiment with ecstasy if they were in a context of drug use, except for an interviewee, who said she would use that drug in case she did not...”
have her drug of choice (marijuana). In the EXP group, most of the interviewees reported they would not use ecstasy again.

Discretionary Revisions:

1.) The authors don’t include what language the research was conducted in.
   - We included: “The interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the language spoken in Brazil”.

2.) You might consider exploring a paper myself (Elyse Ona Singer) and Jean J. Schensul wrote entitled “Negotiating Ecstasy Risk, Reward, and Control: A Qualitative Analysis of Drug Management Patterns Among Ecstasy-Using Urban Young Adults,” in Substance Use and Misuse. This article makes a case for the necessity of exploring Ecstasy cessation and would be useful to cite in the “background” section in paragraph 5 after the sentence that begins “Some authors have suggested…”
   - We included: “A qualitative study in the USA found, in a sample of 115 individuals, that 8.6% were discontinuing ecstasy use and attributed it to negative experiences, erection difficulties and paranoia. They said the risks had begun to outweigh the benefits associated with consumption.”

3.) In the section of the paper labeled “background,” the first sentence reads: “Ecstasy has been used by young adults on every continent, and prevalence rates….” I suggest the word “and” be replaced with the word “but” so the sentence reads: “Ecstasy has been used by young adults on every continent, but prevalence rates vary…”
   - We altered the sentence to: “and the prevalence rates vary from country to country, population and point in time.”

4.) In paragraph 2 of the background section the sentence that reads: “These events are attended by young adults and are characterized by electronic music and colorful decor” should read: “These events are attended by young adults and are characterized by the presence of electronic music and colorful décor.”
We altered the sentence to: “These events are attended by young adults and are characterized by the presence of electronic music and colorful décor.”

5.) In paragraph 6 of the Background section the last sentence might be re-written to read: “Most studies have been conducted in North American and Europe; thus, new studies on ex-users are needed to illuminate patterns of cessation across cultural contexts such as in Latin America.”

- We altered the sentence to: “Most studies have been conducted in North America and Europe; thus, new studies on ex-users are called for to clarify the patterns of discontinuing use, especially within cultural contexts as Latin America.”

6.) In the background section paragraph 7, line 1 might be re-written to read:

“There has been little research conducted on individuals who have never used Ecstasy or who never advanced beyond experimental use.”

- We altered the sentence to: “Another information gap involves”

7.) In the Methods section under the sub-section labeled “interviews,” authors might describe any precautions that were taken during interview sessions because participants were being asked personal questions about illicit behavior. Also, if participants expressed interest in entering a substance use program during the interview, were they referred anywhere?

- We inserted: “The interviews were carried out in closed rooms, and the interviewer advised the volunteers that they could give it up whenever they wanted. None of them did. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the language spoken in Brazil.”

- “In our study the participants showed no interest to participate in any programs of substance use.”

8.) In The Results section in the sub-section labeled “Adverse effects,” authors explain that Ex-users decided to quit due to complications associated with long-term use. Because inclusion in the category of Ex-user requires that users have used Ecstasy at least 5 times in their lives but not in the past 12 months, I’m wondering how much variation there was in terms of length of Ecstasy use
career and number of times used among users classified in this group. Further, did length of E career and number of times used on one’s lifetime affect the reasons they chose to quit and the difficulty they had in quitting?

- We altered the sentence: “The EX-US reported different histories of ecstasy use. The time they had been using the drug ranged from two to 10 years. Additionally, during this time the frequency of use also ranged from four times a week to once a month.”

- “In our study none of the interviewees reported difficulty to stop using ecstasy.”

9.) In the section labeled “Dependency,” data reveals that the Ex-users report that Ecstasy does not lead to chemical dependency. At this point I think it’s important to include an explanatory sentence such as: “The fact that Ex-users report that Ecstasy does not lead to chemical dependency might be because they were able to quit successfully.” Based on a study by Singer and Schensul (2011) I know that currents Ecstasy users who wanted to quit but were unable did report feeling chemically dependent on Ecstasy.

- We inserted: “Singer and Schensul found individuals who considered that they had lost control of their consumption of ecstasy. The users reported several unsuccessful strategies to quit consumption. These results differ from those of our study. Therefore, more studies are needed concerning individuals who try to stop using the drug.”

10.) In conclusion authors might include the following: Because Ex-users reported quitting Ecstasy as a result of changes in their lives such as professional responsibilities or personal growth, it seems that Ecstasy might be a drug that certain groups of people grow out of. This information is useful in developing prevention/intervention programs that should emphasize how Ecstasy interferes with individual responsibilities and life trajectories.
Interventions/prevention work might emphasize life goal setting as a deterrent from use.

- We inserted: "Another aspect to be considered in the interventions is the discussion of life goals and individual responsibilities".

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.