

On Coba and Cocok: youth-led drug-experimentation in Eastern Indonesia

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The everyday lives of contemporary youths are awash with drugs to boost pleasure, moods, sexual performance, vitality, appearance and health. This paper examines pervasive practices of chemical 'self-maximization' from the perspectives of youths themselves. The research for this paper was conducted among male, female and transgender (male to female, so-called *waria*) sex workers in Makassar, Indonesia. It presents the authors' ethnographic findings on how these youths experiment with drugs to achieve their desired mental and bodily states: with the painkiller Somadril to feel happy, confident and less reluctant to engage in sex with clients, and contraceptive pills and injectable hormones to feminize their male bodies and to attract customers. Youths are extremely creative in adjusting dosages and mixing substances, with knowledge of the (mostly positive) 'lived effects' of drugs spreading through collective experimentation and word of mouth. The paper outlines how these experimental practices differ from those that have become the gold standard in biomedicine.

Keywords: youth; pharmaceuticals; sexuality; enhancement; experimentation

Introduction

The everyday lives of contemporary youths are awash with drugs to boost pleasure, moods, sexual performance, vitality, appearance and health (Hardon, Idrus, and Hymans 2013). A growing body of sociological and anthropological studies, mostly conducted among student populations in affluent societies, indeed points to the 'pharmaceuticalization' of youths' everyday lives (e.g. Hurwitz 2005; McCabe et al. 2008; DeSantis, Webb and Noar 2008; Williams et al. 2008; Elliot 2011). Many of these studies have focused on the abuse of prescription drugs – painkillers, cognitive enhancement drugs and other substances with psycho-active properties – which circulate freely through youth networks alongside illegal drugs such as amphetamines and cocaine. It is noteworthy that prescription drugs are often seen by youths (and adults) to be safer and less addictive than illegal narcotics. Cognitive enhancement drugs such as Ritalin are widely used by college students to stay awake and to aid concentration and memory (McCabe, Teter, and Boyd 2006; DeSantis, Webb, and Noar 2008), high school girls are turning to antidepressants to provide energy and relief (Knudsen, Hansen, and Eskildsen 2003), and the imperative to socialize is fuelling the use of analgesics meant to treat headaches (Hansen, Hansen, and Holstein 2008).

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