Studying moralities in drug policy: an editorial introduction

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Abstract

This editorial introduces the main themes of a special issue on moralities in drug policy. It pays particular attention to three themes in this special issue: conceptualising moralities in drug policy; methodological approaches for studying moralities in drug policy; and conflicts, overlaps and ambivalences between moralities in drug policy. The editorial closes with some suggestions for further research on these issues, and a plea for scholars and policy makers to recognise that both the roles and contents of moralities in drug policy are multiple.

Introduction

The study of moralities is emerging as an important and – we argue – essential part of the international development of drug policy analysis. We have each contributed to this emergence in various ways (Askew, 2016; Askew & Bone, 2019; Askew & Ritter, 2023; Dertadian & Askew, 2024; Ritter et al., 2018; Stevens, 2011, 2019, 2024; Stevens & Zampini, 2018). We recognise the pioneering contributions of other researchers (Duster, 1970; Euchner et al., 2013; Ferraiolo, 2014; Husak, 1992; Keane, 2003; MacCoun & Reuter, 2001; Murji, 1998; Rogeberg, 2015; Zampini, 2018; Zampini et al., 2021). These developments inspired us to invite scholars to contribute to this special issue on moralities in drug policy. Here we provide an editorial introduction.

We were very glad to receive a wide range of submissions, from eight countries across five continents, including studies from both the global North and South, as well as two more theoretical articles. The range of topics covered include the development of harm reduction approaches in Sweden (Eriksson et al., 2024), Mexico (Ruiz Flores López et al., 2024) and Hong Kong (Smith et al., 2024), policies and attitudes towards women who use drugs in Scotland (Laycock & Ryan, 2024), punitive drug policy regimes in the Philippines (Lasco & Abesamis, 2024) and Indonesia (Hoyle & Harris, 2024), policy deliberations on methamphetamine in Australia (Kelaita, Grealy & Ritter, 2024), and on ayhuasca in Brazil (Krause, 2024), as well as less geographically specific discussions of liberalism in drug policy reform (Nicholls, 2024) and of the concept of 'virtuous drug use' (Chatwine and Alexander, 2025). The breadth of places and issues demonstrates that analysis of morality and values are intimately and internationally connected to every aspect of drug policy and drug use.

To provide some structure to our discussion of these diverse studies, we first consider how moralities are defined in drug policy scholarship. We then examine the mechanisms of moral framing that are revealed by the articles in this issue, and the methods that are used to study them, before presenting some key findings that are common to various studies. Finally, we suggest some ways forward for further development of the field. We hope that this editorial and the articles included in the special issue will support continued scholarship on the many aspects of moralities, values and drug policy.

Conceptualising moralities[1] in drug policy

Complaints about the weakness of definitions of morality in drug policy analysis have existed since an early review of Duster's (1970) classic work on the links between morality and laws on drugs

[1] Despite the various, subtle distinctions between the terms 'morality', 'ethics' and 'values' that multiple researchers have proposed, we use them interchangeably in this article to refer to the normative commitments that inform drug policy making and analysis.

(Hicks, 1973). Duster defined morality as the 'the strong feelings which people have about right and wrong' (Duster, 1970, p. 4). This is similar to the everyday sense of morality as the judgements we make about good and bad. But these judgements are not just sentimental. There are many ways of thinking through judgements of good and bad. One example is to use a set of principles drawn from virtue ethics. This goes as far back as Aristotle, but is articulated in drug policy analysis in more contemporary forms (e.g. Sjoquist, 2023). At its core, virtue ethics is about preferring actions and social conditions that promote human flourishing; a concern that is shared by Martha Nussbaum (1992). According to Andrew Sayer (2011), this provides ways of thinking about what matters, and why.

However, virtue ethics is only one branch of moral philosophy. The seminal work of MacCoun and Reuter (2001) applied rules-based (deontological) and consequentialist (utilitarian) moral philosophies to drug policy. The roots of these approaches can be found, on the one hand, in the utilitarian thinking of John Stuart Mill and his mentor Jeremy Bentham (Cote, 2024). On the other hand, there are attempts to construct rational arguments – in the wake of Kant and his inheritors – for various rules and rights, including the right to use drugs (Hoffman, 2024; Stevens, 2011). The legacy of liberal thinking is explored by Nicholls (2024) in this issue. He shows how different conceptions of liberty create divisions within the drug policy reform movement, which can hamper joint work towards common goals.

In Chatwin and Alexander's (2025) article, they observe a move beyond thinking in terms of drug use as a freedom that a person can choose (as long as it does not harm others). They note that for some people – and especially users of psychedelics – drug use comes to be seen as virtuous in itself. They place this in the context of the neo-liberal appeal to optimise oneself for the market, and to take responsibility for one's own health by purchasing pharmaceutical products for self-improvement. There is an echo here of Foucault's later work, in which he drew on ancient Greek philosophy to argue that the care and improvement of the self is indeed a virtue (Foucault, 2005), although Foucault was highly critical of the neo-liberal approach to self-optimisation (Schneider, 2020).

Aside from applying the various branches of moral philosophy, another approach to morality comes from psychology. This understands morals or values to be the underlying beliefs that motivate action (Schwartz, 1992). Here there is a long tradition – going back at least to Kohlberg's (1958) theory of moral development - within psychology in particular that has examined various moral positions. Importantly, this type of work does not concern itself with justifying the correctness or logic of any one particular moral view, but rather describes those that are commonly held. Here we note two commonly used conceptual tools for describing moral claims in drug policy. One is moral foundations theory (MFT) (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012), as used in this special issue by Eriksson et al (2024) and Lopez et al (Ruiz Flores López et al., 2024). MFT helps them to think about the repertoire of normative commitments on which people draw when making judgements about drug users and policies. Kelaita et al (2024) draw on Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic values to perform a similar role, providing a menu of moral notions which can be identified in the speech and writings of drug policy actors.

We are reminded, though, that any list of moral positions might not be all-encompassing. The article in this issue by Smith et al (2024) raises the Confucian focus on familial and social connection, which is less visible in MFT and basic values theory. In combination with more liberal values of personal autonomy, this Confucian value influences the practices of people who work in drug treatment in Hong Kong, in a way that is specific to this east Asian setting. Different parts of east Asia have different interpretations of Confucianism, so we might expect to see different forms of morality in drug policy in China, Korea and Japan (Takamatsu et al., 2024).

Similarly, Hoyle and Harry (2024), in work examining the values of people working across the criminal justice system in Indonesia, find that a retributive and purgative rationale resonated across their data. This focuses on ridding society of its most 'evil' elements; an ethos in which killing people who break drug laws is an obligatory moral duty. While this may be cast as a particularly severe expression of what the MFT moral foundation of purity/sanctity, it should be a salutary reminder of the socio-political and cultural dependences associated with moral positions (and that MFT and Schwartz come to us from Western Nations).

We also need to take account of the different ways that moralities relate to different people in the same location. In some places, with some substances, people who use drugs are thought of as having lower moral valence, as being less than fully human (Eriksson et al., 2024; Hoyle & Harry, 2024; Stevens, 2019). Some groups of people who use drugs may face particular forms of moral denigration. In this special issue, Laycock and Ryan (2024) show how some women in Scotland are judged for stepping outside the traditional feminine roles of housewife and mother, with their multiple other roles being ignored. This framing of women who use drugs renders them as passive bearers of risk, rather than as active agents of change.

Methodological approached for studying moralities in drug policy

In studying the role of moralities in drug policy, we face two key challenges. The causal mechanisms that produce drug policies are not directly observable and so must be inferred from the traces they leave for empirical observation (Byrne, 2011). So the first methodological challenge is how to surface the role of underlying moralities in influencing action in drug policy. The second is how to use these moralities to *explain* – rather than just describe – how drug policy is made and implemented.

With reference to the first challenge, the papers in this issue demonstrate a range of data sources and analytic methods to surface values. Data from focus groups and interviews with people who use drugs, policy makers, and frontline workers were employed by Laycock and Ryan (2024), Eriksson et al (2024), Smith et al (2024), and by Hoyle and Harry (2024). Other studies used a variety of documents as data, including policy documents, media, and documents from civil society and non-government actors (Kelaita et al., 2024; Krause, 2024; Lasco & Abesamis, 2024). Two papers are essays (Chatwin & Alexander, 2025; Nicholls, 2024) and one paper used an experimental survey method (Ruiz Flores López et al., 2024). Moving from the data to analysis, most of these papers used various qualitative analytic methods, including critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis, and grounded theory analysis. As Kelaita et al (2024) point out, however, there is not necessarily a ready relationship between a piece of text (whether written or oral) and its underlying value stance. This is a key methodological challenge for research in this area.

The second challenge is perhaps even more difficult. To be persuasive and practically useful, an explanation must reveal the underlying causes of the observed phenomenon, not just a correlation or constant conjunction from one type of event to another (Bhaskar, 1975; Stevens, 2020). Explanation must be sensitive to the specificities of the contexts in which the causal pathway operates. And explanation should be falsifiable; there must be some way by which we would know if a proposed explanation were incorrect. To bowdlerise Popper (1972), to be adequate, an explanation should not be 'too vague to be false'.

Using existing concepts to describe the moral contents of drug policy debates, such as MFT and basic values, helps us to be less vague when using moralities to explain drug policy processes. We also need concepts of how these moral values are deployed in the specific social world of policy making. We have already discussed Smith et al's (2024) analysis of moralities in the social world of drug treatment professionals in Hong Kong. Lasco and Abesamis (2024) also provide a useful example in

their research on the construction of young people as passive victims in drug policy discussions in the Philippines. They note that the long tradition of critical criminology provides useful concepts for thinking about what Schneider and Ingram (1993) elsewhere call the 'social construction of target populations'. Lasco and Abesamis cite the work of Becker (1963) and Reinarman (1994) on 'moral entrepreneurs' and their role in constructing 'folk devils', as well as drawing on Stevens' (2024) work on the 'ethico-political bases' of drug policy.

In his analysis of liberal drug policy reform efforts, Nicholls (2024) also surfaces the ethico-political positions that are at play. In showing the moral tensions that exist between various parts of the drug policy reform movement, he provides a potential explanation of why its success has so far been limited (as demonstrated, for example, by the absence of decriminalisation in Scotland). This tendency of reform movements to split may help us explain why the oft-noted failure of drug prohibition to meet its stated aims has not been followed by a coherent and successful campaign to institutionalise a different model of drug regulation.

Krause (2024) provides a counter-factual example to contrast to policy inertia in Scotland. In Brazil, he observes more successful mobilisation for policy reform, enabled by the convergence of three different framings of ayahuasca; religious, charitable and scientific. As Schwartz (1992) and Haidt (2012) both suggest in their work on moral bases and foundations, there are opportunities for moralities to overlap as well as conflict. When they come together, they can cause drug policy to change, especially when this also suits the material interests of powerful groups, and there are favourable political contingences at that particular place and moment (Stevens, 2024).

Clashing, overlapping and ambivalent moralities

With these conceptual tools and methodological challenges (among others), the authors of the articles in this special issue have produced useful insights, with at least one common theme, which relates to the relationships between different moralities in drug policy. Perhaps the most visible relationship between values is when they come into direct conflict. The values of people who want to benefit from recreational, or even 'virtuous' drug use are obviously in direct conflict with the values of people who want to prohibit drug use, and even to expunge people who use drug users from society. Kelaita et al (2024) make explicit use of Schwartz's circumplex of basic values to show the presence of two values in policy discussions that are diametrically opposite on this circular diagram; security and universalism. However, there are also several instances of where different values are observed to overlap with each other that are revealed in the articles collected here. For example, Eriksson et al (2024) note the collision of authoritarian values with paternalist care; an overlap that has previously been noted in the compatibility of public health measures with the imperatives of coercive state control (Lupton, 1995; Stevens, 2024).

In their article, Hoyle and Harris (2024) also spot an overlap which has previously been observed between compassion and traditionalism (Stevens, 2024). While drug policy reformers of the ilk studied by Nicholls (2024) often accuse drug policy conservatives of lacking compassion, this is not necessarily the case. It may just be that reformers and prohibitionists have different visions of who is worthy of compassion, and how it should be expressed. As an example of such variegated compassion, Lasco and Abesamis (2024) observe how young people in the Philippines are simultaneously viewed as needing salvation and surveillance, worthy of compassion as long as they comply. It is this kind of amalgam of values that produces policy positions that seem incomprehensible to people who see punishment and care as inhabiting entirely different moral universes.

Even more tricky moral predicaments can arise when the values held about people who use drugs are profoundly ambivalent. If people who use drugs are framed both as passive victims *and* as threatening outsiders, as they have been shown to be in several of the studies in this special issue, then we might expect there to be self-contradictory and self-defeating policy responses as a result; another potential component of explanations of the continuation of failed 'war on drugs' approaches.

When studying from a morality lens, Nicholls (2024) and Erickson et al (2024) highlight the fluidity of concepts, such as harm reduction. From one moral standpoint, harm reduction is associated with freedom and bodily autonomy, but from another, it is a process within recovery journeys that is connected to control and restraint (Hunt & Stevens, 2004). Studying the moral positions within political arguments helps to unearth these distinctions and highlight the multiple interpretations of policy approaches that can be explained by identifying the distinct value clusters that inform them.

An agenda for studying moralities in drug policy

Armed with the insights from the articles collected in this special issue, we would like to make some suggestions on how we, as a field, can develop the study of moralities in drug policy.

First of all, we address the perennial question of money. Several of the studies presented here are small-scale and exploratory in nature. If there are to be more rigorous and comprehensive studies, then funders will have to support the necessary costs. It would be great to see funders issue specific calls for research on the normative aspects of drug policy. Failing that, they should at least be open to including studies of moralities in their more general funding opportunities.

With or without money, we will need to develop better theories if we want to go beyond the description of drug policy to *explanation* of how it arises and works in practice. There are a host of theories available for analysing the policy process (Cairney, 2019; Sabatier & Weible, 2018; Stevens, 2024). By combining them with what we know about drug policy (Ritter, 2022), we can hope to sharpen our analyses, making theoretical concepts more relevant for studying drug policy, and then returning the favour by using these insights to improve more general theories of the policy process. For example, we suggest that studying drug policy (and some of the articles in this special issue) may encourage users of the advocacy coalition framework (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018) to develop more specific theories of where 'core beliefs' come from, and how they affect policy making.

With the attempt to explain comes the challenge of falsification. It is tempting and easy to create 'just so' stories that fit the facts of the case to a conveniently preferred narrative. However, it is only by rigorous testing that we will know whether an explanation is 'just so' or actually practically adequate. We would be very interested to read efforts to challenge as well as transport the explanations offered in this special issue in other places and times. Such lively and open discussion should help us to develop explanations that are both more theoretically satisfying and more practically useful in improving people's lives.

One article in this special issue has directly considered the issue of how to surface moralities in policy analysis in some detail (Kelaita et al., 2024). As the study of moralities in drug policy develops, this will be a persistent problem. There will continue to be balances to draw between creative insight in policy analysis and the desire for reliable – and even replicable – analysis. We do not suggest that there is one correct way to infer the underlying cultural structures of morality from empirical data. Rather, we invite our colleagues to reflect on this challenge, and to be explicit about how they meet it.

This is not just a challenge for professional researchers. Increasingly, we see demands that there should be 'nothing about us without us' in the field of drug policy studies (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network et al., 2008). This applies especially strongly when we get into studying moral judgements. There is no morally neutral position from which to study such commitments. We all have them, even if we manage to pare the scope of our normative preferences down to just valuing the creation of knowledge. Since we are in the world of values, as well as studying it, then we cannot ignore the values held by the people we study, be they people who make policy, or people who use and sell drugs. Perhaps the most democratically justifiable way of acknowledging this is to include such people as researchers, and to attempt to value different forms of knowledge equally. This is not easy to achieve in practice, but the effort itself may be useful in revealing ongoing epistemic inequalities and in helping drive forward alternative drug policy approaches that navigate the unavoidable diversity of values.

Conclusion

After all, the point of studying drug policy is not to create aesthetic objects of academic distinction. For us, the value of drug policy research lies in its ability to inform social action so that the scope of human freedom can be shared and increased, while arbitrary oppression and suffering are reduced. That is the moral preference that we bring to our work. But it is not the only normative belief that animates drug policy. To build on this special issue's concepts, challenges and findings on the ethical aspects of drug policy, we must recognise that the roles as well as the content of moralities in drug policy are multiple.

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