

Soc Sci Med. 2002 Sep;55(5):695-708.

Vocabularies of motive for illicit steroid use among bodybuilders.

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Illicit steroid use, for purposes of performance and physique enhancement, is widely deemed unnecessary, wrong and dangerous. Such activity would appear especially foolhardy when engaged in by non-professional athletes who otherwise adhere to 'healthy' exercise regimens. Here a gap exists between many illicit steroid users' actions and societal expectations. Using qualitative data generated in South Wales, this paper explores bodybuilders' vocabularies of motive for illicit steroid use. These accounts which justified, rather than excused, steroid use were predominant during question situations between the participant observer and the researched. In supporting the fundamental tenets of their drug subculture, and as part of the underlying negotiation of self-identity, respondents espoused three main justifications for their own and/or other bodybuilders' illicit steroid use; namely: self-fulfilment accounts, condemnation of condemners and a denial of injury. Here steroid use was rationalised as a legitimate means to an end, observers passing negative judgements were rejected and it was claimed steroids do not (seriously) harm the user's health or threaten society more generally. These vocabularies of motive, acquired and honoured within bodybuilding settings, comprise a complex of subjective meanings which seem to the actor to be an adequate ground for the conduct in question. Similar to other sociological studies, this paper states that it is imperative to explore the social meanings which illicit drug users attach to their 'risk' practices. Without these understandings, researchers and health promoters may struggle to appreciate fully why illicit drug users behave as they do.

PMID:

12190264

[PubMed - indexed for MEDLINE]