



## Book Review

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**Habitus and drug using environments: Health, place and lived-experience**, by Steven Parkin, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, 280 pp., £58.50, ISBN: 978-1-4094-6492-1 (hardback)

*Habitus and Drug Using Environments* draws richly on extensive fieldwork conducted across four field sites in England to offer fresh insights into the everyday lives of injecting drug users. Parkin convincingly argues for the importance of place in shaping injecting practices and norms and in producing harms and hazards.

Parkin's book is, like most monographs, the outcome of PhD research although here it is supplemented by subsequent research data from additional projects and field sites. The book's structure and style reflect the genre, offering an in depth examination into theory, methods and methodology before introducing the reader to the more substantive material. Such paced, scholarly work feels "slow" to a reader who has lately been gorging on so-called "public ethnography" (Adler & Adler, 2012). Whilst public ethnography hides its academic credentials in the footnotes in favour of thick description, Parkin carefully works through the existing research and theory, giving due credit and critique to drug researchers on whose work he builds, from Howard Becker, to Jock Young, to Tim Rhodes. Similarly, he offers an entire chapter critiquing dominant theoretical approaches in this field, and another setting up Bourdieu as an alternative. Some readers may be frustrated by such a long, theoretical run in, but it is worthwhile reading, offering clear and concise contextualisation of his research.

In the same way, Parkin breaks with contemporary trends towards confessional modes of ethnography, offering a methodology chapter more focussed on issues of methodological rigour than the researcher's personal experiences and reflections. This solemn approach is arguably necessary – this is a large and complex project involving many interlinked methods of data collection (described below) – but at times, insights from the author could have been valuable. For example, he states rather bloodlessly, that "at least ten episodes of fatal overdose occurred in outdoor locations during the period July 2006–January 2009... and all but one of those sites were street based injecting sites visited during fieldwork and data collection" (p. 90). It is not clear whether this statement is intended to demonstrate methodological

rigour, or whether it is meant as a shocking insight into the fact that public drug injecting sites are literally a matter of life and death.

Parkin's multi-method fieldwork took place across three local authorities between 2006 and 2011. Data were collected through ethnographic observations of injecting sites (over 14 months in total); environmental assessments of over 400 injecting sites; over 1000 photographs of injecting sites (many are included in the book) and over 200 interviews, including 71 with injecting drug users and 169 with agency representatives, mostly from needle exchanges. This breadth and depth of data drive the second half of the book, offering rich, vivid insights into the places and meanings behind injecting practices across a wide variety of settings from disabled toilets to parks and deserted stairwells. Photographs and quotes from respondents bring their reality to life on the page. This description is also driven by the author's explicit, theoretical argument, that public injecting practices are the outcome of respondents' "public injecting habitus".

Parkin's use of Bourdieusian theory rests on an important adaption. Classically, the habitus is understood as an internalization of social structures such as class, gender, ethnicity and so on that operate from within the actor through their "feel for the game". Parkin switches social structures for environmental structures taking a broad interpretation of "field". For example, Chapter 6 examines how environmental "structures" including injecting spaces, materials, corporeality, time and environment become internalised as *doxic beliefs*, "taken for granted, mundane belief systems that may be attached to the habitus" (p. 111). Although his analysis clearly shows a dialectic relationship between injectors and injecting sites, more could have been said about the interaction between the drug "field" and class, gender and ethnicity. This analysis is implicit – for example, Parkin notes that a high percentage of respondents were homeless or roofless which of course profoundly shapes the kinds of places they can and cannot access.

In many senses, Parkin's appropriation of Bourdieu makes sense: sociologists of embodiment draw richly on his logic of practice, and especially the notion of a "feel for the game" (or practical logic). Parkin argues persuasively that injecting drugs is an embodied practice. Parkin's key concern is in understanding injecting practices through the lens of the

dialectic between structure and agency. Bourdieu's theory of practice is highly suitable, approaching both as deeply intertwined. It also helps understand how respondents' injecting practices are structured, and not simply the outcome of a rational, or logical calculation. The implication is that promoting safer injecting practices demands deep level change, not just "better choices".

Overall, I really enjoyed reading this scholarly book. Practitioners may be advised to skip straight to the empirical chapters. Bourdieusian theorists will either appreciate Parkin's novel understanding of "structure" or struggle with it. The real strength of this book is the quality of the

data and argument throughout which not only gives a sense of the places in which injecting drug use takes place, but leaves us in no doubt that place matters.

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## Reference

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