Drug policy, public health and values revisited

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The public health approach comes in different flavours. A puristic approach only considers impacts on health, but it can also be extended to take account of policy consequences beyond this. The book *Drug policy and the public good* (DPPG) (Babor et al., 2015) exemplifies the latter approach, aiming at a comprehensive review of the evidence for a variety of drug policy instruments on a variety of relevant outcomes.

To present a broad and neutral review of policy evidence, we need to systematically identify the full set of outcomes and concerns emphasised by different policy stakeholder groups. In Rogeberg (2015), I argue that this is currently not the case in DPPG, which I illustrated with four concerns stressed by drug policy reform movements. My claim was not that these are the only concerns missing, nor that these concerns should be the main considerations in policy. They do, however, suggest that the current approach has “blind spots” that need to be addressed.

I am very grateful to have received thoughtful and interesting responses to this from two of the book’s authors, Professors Babor and Room (Babor 2015; Room 2015). In light of these, I would like to clarify the three concerns, or “lessons”, on which the authors had comments.

The first lesson concerns the full harms of illegal markets. Illegal markets cause governments to spend resources on enforcement, criminalise users, involve wasteful and inefficient supply and distribution, and lead to increased violence and death. Several of these consequences can be quantified and are substantial.

Room reads this section as an attempt at proving that prohibition is always a bad policy, but I agree with him that this depends: policies are not “good” or “bad” in isolation, they are “better” or “worse” than their alternatives. Comparing policies, however, requires us to consider the full set of pros and cons for each option. For prohibition, this includes the full set of harms from illegal markets. If the evidence base for some outcomes was weak at the time, as Babor suggests, I would have preferred that the book noted these as potentially important and relevant outcomes about which we had insufficient research.

The second lesson concerned the fact that many users see their own use as net-positive in their own lives. The relevance of such “benefits” differs by substance. While increased use predictably leads to more people with harmful patterns of use, substances differ in how likely addictions are, how long they last and how much they harm human health and happiness. If we wish to take account of both users’ self-perceived benefits from use, and of addictions and harms from abuse, then these differences across substances are relevant to policy. For some substances, subjective
benefits may matter, for others they may not.

Neither Babor nor Room seems willing to consider such benefits-from-use. Babor argues that subjective benefits can be ignored when choices involve risks to health, while Room argues that they can be ignored because our preferences for intoxicants are shaped by social/commercial influence. While these considerations are relevant to the normative discussion of which concerns to emphasise, they conflict with the explicit statement in DPPG that scientists “have no more standing than anyone else in a society to say which specific outcomes a society should care about the most, or whether such outcomes are good, bad, or indifferent” (p. 251). Ignoring subjectively perceived benefits from use means taking it as given that society ought to be indifferent to this outcome. In this way, normative intuitions that may be common within some academic communities would influence the choice of concerns to be included. I believe a better solution would be to separate the two discussions, distinguishing the presence and size of self-perceived benefits from the (normative) weight we think they should be assigned.

Turning to the third lesson, that the current drug policy process may itself be a barrier to sensible policies, both authors seem to agree to some extent that this is the case. Babor, however, also writes that “[c]riticism of governments implies a level of omniscience we were reluctant to assume”. As DPPG documents how several policies fail to accomplish the very aims used to justify them, however, there is no need for omniscience. Just as we would note the damaging influence of commercial interests on tobacco, alcohol and environmental policy, we should also be able to note the damaging influence of “moral panic” and entrenched special interests on drug policy. In his response, Babor also characterises the three reform movements as “single issue movements” incapable of “dealing with the broad range of issues faced by policymakers”. In a similar way, it should be possible to characterise many current drug policies as reflecting a “single issue movement” focused on reducing prevalence and moral/social acceptance of use, seemingly incapable of dealing (or unwilling to deal) with the broad range of issues drug policy involves for society. If this is a barrier to good policy, then this should be worth noting.

In closing, I again thank the two authors for taking the time to respond. We agree that drug policy is a complex field that needs to consider a variety of concerns, none of them fully covered by any existing framework or discipline. In line with this, I want to stress that my issue was not with what was included in DPPG but with what was not: our choice of which concerns to cover influences the way in which different policies are perceived. Since I highlight “missed” concerns that are emphasised by reform movements, for instance, Room at times seems to read my article as an attempted argument against prohibition as such. By neglecting or downplaying such concerns, however, DPPG would tilt the table in the opposite direction. As Room writes, it may be too much to expect from the public health field (or any other) that all relevant concerns are comprehensively covered. It is precisely for this reason that cross-disciplinary communication and perspectives...
from different stakeholder groups are valuable.

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