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More than problem solving: critical reflections on the ‘problematization’ of alcohol-related violence in Kings Cross

A commentary for Drug and Alcohol Review

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On 15 August 2012, the NSW O'Farrell government announced a suite of new restrictions on licensed venues in Kings Cross [1, 2]. To some observers, this decision may have appeared as an authoritative act; the government taking action to 'solve the problem' of alcohol-related violence, in light of the tragic death of 18-year old Thomas Kelly which, O'Farrell explained, "had, quite rightly, focused attention on Kings Cross" [1]. Kelly died after being punched in the face, in an alleged unprovoked attack at 10pm on Saturday 7 July, whilst walking with two friends in Kings Cross (one of Sydney's late night entertainment precincts) [3, 4]. But is it too simplistic to explain moments of policy change, such as these new restrictions, as rational, responsive, problem-solving acts of government? As researchers in the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) field, should we be more critical and dig beyond the surface of moments like this to better understand how issues come to be represented as policy problems and how these 'problematizations' influence possible responses?

Multiple models of policy making provide ways of understanding policy processes beyond the veneer of policy decision-making as authoritative acts of government [5]. Kelly's tragic death, the result of a violent act in Sydney's most notorious nightspot, created what one theorist Kingdon would describe as a 'focusing event' [6]. Although such an event may draw the attention of policy makers, it does not necessarily lead us to understanding a policy problem in *one particular* way. Problem definitions are constructed and compete through power and discourse [7]. Following Kelly's death, the 'problem' which came to the fore was constructed as alcohol-related violence by government, media, police, community members and AOD researchers alike [8, 9, 10, 11]. However, Kelly's alleged attacker is yet to be tried at court, and we do not know to what extent (if at all) alcohol was directly involved in this event. Moreover, there is evidence that assaults have decreased in Kings Cross over the last decade [12]. The characterisation of alcohol-related violence as the 'policy problem' raises a host of questions: why was this particular problem definition so readily adopted? Who were the proponents and opponents of this problem framing? What factors enabled this frame to be adopted? What role did the AOD field play by promulgating this problem representation? Importantly, by choosing to focus on this problem definition, what are we leaving 'un-problematized'? Are we, for example, turning a blind eye to violence in young Australian male culture, or the multiple drivers of drinking culture that extend beyond the boundaries of Kings Cross, or the increasing curtailment of young people's use of public space? To what extent has the gentrification of inner city areas contributed to local community concerns about public space? All told, why are certain accounts privileged while others are silenced? How else could this untimely death have been understood?

The representation of policy problems is important, because it has implications for how we think about (and justify) the range of possible policy responses [7]. The singular focus on alcohol-related violence as the policy problem in Kings Cross has been 'coupled' [6] with responses such as restrictions on licensed venues [2, 13], increased policing [14], New York style 'broken-windows' approaches [15], proposals for advertising campaigns in venues and media to target public drunkenness [16], while researchers have pointed to the availability of alcohol, advertising and pricing as solutions [8, 17]. The discourse of 'safety' and 'control' arising from the representation of alcohol-related violence as the policy problem has meant that discussion of alternative responses such as brief interventions, aggression management, access to services or community-based initiatives has been absent. Moreover, the establishment of this discourse has meant that although the attack on Kelly took place at 10pm, this fact seems to be irrelevant to the restrictions implemented, which curtail alcohol availability after midnight.

Neither the construction of problem definitions, nor the selection of policy responses happens in a vacuum of 'authoritative choice'. It is important to step back and consider the political context in which these issues are being debated, and how this context fundamentally frames discussion of 'problems' and 'solutions'. According to policy processes theories [6, 18, 19], politics and ideology play a central role in policy. The next election for the City of Sydney Council will be held in September 2012 and is being hotly contested, with alcohol-related violence now taking centre stage. Prominent Labor figure Paul Keating lashed out at independent Lord Mayor Clover Moore, calling her the "Queen of Grog", blaming her council's policy of small bar licenses for the "explosion" of alcohol-related violence in Kings Cross [20]. Moore drew attention to the NSW Liberal Government's jurisdictional responsibilities by providing an 'action list' focused on provision of public transport in Kings Cross [21] and night time economy initiatives [22]. The ideological conceptualisation of 'public space' in an increasingly gentrified Kings Cross is central to these debates. Additionally, police, closely scrutinised in the months leading up to Kelly's death after the controversial shooting of two young people in Kings Cross [23], have since Kelly's death bemoaned a lack of police resources [14]. Representatives of the alcohol industry also sought to frame the discussion by deflecting responsibility away from the industry and onto 'deviant' individuals, for example the Australian Hotels Association NSW Chief Executive Paul Nicolaou called for tougher 'zero tolerance' penalties for drug and alcohol offences and criminal behaviour [24]. All of these factors require substantial analysis to understand their role in representing and constructing 'problems' and 'solutions'.

The recent Kings Cross event provides opportunity for further critical analysis of 'problematization' within the AOD field, and is a timely reminder of work which has been undertaken in the sociological tradition [e.g. 25, 26, 27]. If, as Hoppe [28, p.8] argues, policy processes are "fraught with conflicting interests, radically divergent problem framings, competing alternative problem solutions, and highly uncertain outcomes", then the challenge for us, as researchers, is to reflect on how we can more critically make sense of these processes. As researchers we need to be aware that policy making is always about more than addressing societal problems. We need to think about the assumptions underlying definitions of policy problems (including the ones we generate ourselves). We should identify who is defining the range of possible policy responses and how political factors affect the choice and implementation of those options. Finally, not all events become 'problems'. In saying this, we do not deny that there are problems associated with violence and alcohol which require attention. What the aftermath of Kelly's tragic death powerfully demonstrates, however, is how an event can be rapidly appropriated, and how its construction and representation as a problem of alcohol-related violence invites particular responses.

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