Maintaining Class, Producing Gender:
Enhancement-Discourses of Amphetamines in the Popular Media

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A recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly* posed a question that is increasingly at the heart of a research and debates in bioethics and medical anthropology. Since “performance-enhancers are increasingly part of our modern existence, despite our instinct to ban them,” Chris Good (2010) asks, “why don’t we use them for good?” He recommends providing medications such as Adderall and Ritalin among others to scientists to encourage creativity and increase productivity. Though I cannot attest to the intentions of Good’s recommendation, his question speaks to the unique social position of stimulants in the United States (Grinspoon & Hedblom, 1975; Rasmussen, 2008). Amphetamines and their derivatives have, in fact, been used for a variety of “performance enhancing” purposes for over a century (Rasmussen, 2008).

The aggressive, achievement-oriented nature of contemporary U.S. society may promote amphetamine use as a means of personal enhancement (Grinspoon & Hedblom, 1975; Pine, 2007). Throughout this paper, I use the term enhancement to describe the use of medical and pharmaceutical technologies to meet a variety of social and cultural norms, including the improvement of social, sexual and labor-related performance (Quintero & Nichter, 2011). Research indicates that those who use illegally produced methamphetamine (henceforth, methamphetamine) and those who illegally use prescription amphetamines (henceforth, prescription amphetamines) often report similar enhancement-related motivations. Both categories of drugs are used to achieve a slender body, improve sexual performance and increase productivity (Crampton, Mishra, & Zerfas, 2008; Grinspoon & Hedblom, 1975; Joe, 1996; Pine, 2007). Methamphetamine and prescription amphetamines also share a common history, Schedule II federal classification and physical and psychological risks (Hart, 2008; Rasmussen, 2008). Despite all of these similarities, policy and prevention efforts indicate that methamphetamine and prescription amphetamines are viewed as distinct social problems (MethResources, 2010; ONDCP, 2010; Project, 2010) and are targeted in ways that often contradict empirical evidence about use. Guided by the idea that policy and prevention are not immune to the influence of ideology and stereotyping (Bonsignore, et al., 2006; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; A. Schneider & Ingram, 1993; J. W. Schneider, 1985), I examined discourses in popular, fictional media to understand the social meanings of amphetamine use and the social construction of users.

In the following pages, I provide a background on methamphetamine use in the U.S., discuss the present analysis of popular fiction, and address the contextual significance of these discourses. I begin by describing the contradictions between lived experience and epidemiology of amphetamine use and the political rhetoric, policy and prevention efforts that have the potential to impact users. I follow this with a detailed discussion of the study and its implications for social scientists and public health scholars.

**Background: Amphetamine Use, Rhetoric, Policy, and Prevention**

In his history of amphetamines, Rasmussen (2008) estimates that approximately 12% of Americans currently use, licitly or illicitly, a variety of substances for the very purposes once served predominately by amphetamines. That is, people still use drugs to cheer up, to work harder, and to lose weight. In the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, approximately 3% of
young adults reported past-year, non-medical use of amphetamines and their derivatives (SAMHSA, 2008). Of those who illicitly use amphetamines, most engage in non-prescription\(^1\) or off-label\(^2\) use of prescription amphetamines rather than use of illegally produced methamphetamine (SAMHSA, 2008, 2010). However, the dangers of methamphetamine use receive far more attention, as evidenced by news media (Linnemann, 2009; Reding, 2009), policy (MethResources, 2010; ONDCP, 2010) and prevention efforts (FfaDFW, 2010; Project, 2010).

Methamphetamine use has emerged in the past decade as the United States’ most terrifying drug scourge since crack cocaine in the 1980s, and is portrayed as destroying individuals and communities alike (Reding, 2009; Van Gundy, 2006). Female users are portrayed as sexually deviant, male users as criminal (Linnemann, 2009). Even research on methamphetamine use tends to frame the user as a social deviant and the solution as one of individual responsibility (Brecht, O'Brien, von Mayrhauser, & Anglin, 2004; Grant & Kelley, 2007; Sexton, Carlson, Leukefeld, & Booth, 2008). However, when methamphetamine use is situated within the particular cultural and political-economic contexts of the contemporary U.S., there is significant support for (and concern about) the idea that America’s consumer, capitalist ideals in fact encourage people to use these drugs in order to work long hours, meet social expectations regarding gender roles, and to balance domestic and professional obligations (Crampton, et al., 2008; Grinspoon & Hedblom, 1975; Joe, 1996; Pine, 2007). While such a structurally oriented perspective is increasingly appearing in the academic literature, popular ideas about methamphetamine users remain highly stigmatizing and morally driven (Linnemann, 2009), with policy and prevention efforts emphasizing the dangers that use and users pose to families and communities (Anderson, 2010; Erceg-Hurn, 2008; Project, 2010).

People’s attention to the illicit use of prescription amphetamines has been quite different. Research indicates that non-medical use of prescription amphetamines such as Ritalin (methylphenidate) and Adderall (amphetamine) is increasingly popular among college students who use for the express purpose of improving academic performance and balancing social, work, and academic obligations (Quintero & Nichter, 2011; Quintero, Peterson, & Young, 2006) and often report beliefs that these drugs are neither addictive nor dangerous (DeSantis & Hane, 2010). A 2001 study of over 10,000 college students demonstrates that past-year non-medical use of prescription stimulants was 4.1% across 199 colleges in the U.S. (McCabe, Knight, Teter, & Wechsler, 2005). While concern about prescription stimulant use is growing (as evidenced by a call in the 2010 National Drug Control Strategy to increase research on the topic), popular attention is still focused on bioethics debates about the fairness of enhancement technologies (Bostrom & Sandberg, 2009; Wolpe, 2002)--that is, whether these technologies tip the odds toward those with greater advantage, and if they place excessive pressure on “average” youth to excel.

\(^1\) Using a prescription drug without a prescription.

\(^2\) Using a prescription drug in a way other than what it was prescribed or intended for (i.e., using Ritalin to lose weight.)
The media and the discourses contained within play an important role in the way society views and responds to populations and behaviors. This impact can occur through both intentional explicit and unintentional implicit ideologies that contribute to the production of stigma and the perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies (Bayer, 2008; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; A. Schneider & Ingram, 1993; J. W. Schneider, 1985). In this study, I examined popular media discourses about amphetamine use in order to shed light on the social meanings of amphetamines within the particular context of contemporary American society.

Methods

Discourses, defined here as “relatively well-bounded areas of social knowledge” (McHoul & Grace, 1997, p. 31) reflect, legitimize, and produce (often hegemonic) ideologies (Foucault, 1972; van Dijk, 1998). Specifically, the popular media has been shown to have an important role in constructing certain issues as social problems (Gamson, et al., 1992; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), and particular populations as more or less in need of regulation (A. Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Therefore, in order to better understand the divergent social problems that are associated with these similar drugs, it is necessary to examine the popular discourses about them. To date, most research on the social construction of drug use has examined popular news media (Bright, Marsh, Smith, & Bishop, 2008; Coveney, Nerlich, & Martin, 2009; Linnemann, 2009; Reding, 2009; Williams, Seale, Boden, Lowe, & Steinberg, 2008) and political rhetoric (Humphries, 1999; Reinarman & Levine, 1997a, 1997b). Thus, in complement to existing data, I analyzed an alternate but still important media source—popular fiction, consisting of television, novels, and movies—to elucidate the social constructions of amphetamine use and users. In the remainder of this section, I specifically discuss my analysis of these media for discourses that pertain to concept of “enhancement.”

The Media Sample

For this study, I purposively sampled novels, three seasons of the methamphetamine-based television show Breaking Bad assorted episodes from popular network television shows, and fourteen movies. Because my focus is on “popular” discourses that have the potential to impact a wide range of perspectives, I included in my sample media that are readily accessible to the general public. To do this, I sampled from the following non-academic sources. I identified novels through online retailers (Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble); television shows and movies through online databases (Netfix and Internet Movie Database [IMDB]) and two Internet-based lists of “drug films.” To identify media artifacts (i.e., specific books, movies, etc. that met my criteria) (Foss, 2009), I searched the above databases using a number of search terms related to amphetamines: amphetamine, methamphetamine, meth, crystal, crank, speed, Adderall, Ritalin, stimulant, tweak, twee, and ADHD. In order to supplement these artifacts, I asked associates who write film and literature related blogs and reviews to inform me if they came across anything that addressed amphetamines of any kind. I intentionally included both small budget
independent and cult films as well as large-budget major studio films in my sample, though most films dealing with amphetamines were not “blockbusters” (Nash, 2010).

Inclusion criteria sought to limit the sample to contemporarily relevant portrayals of amphetamine use in the United States:

1) Produced/published since 1990;
2) Portray contemporary use;
3) Take place in the United States;
4) Sufficiently address amphetamine use according to criteria of frequency and/or intensity after initial coding (Foss, 2009).

After the initial round of coding to identify the extent to which amphetamines were mentioned in the artifact, ten novels, three full seasons of *Breaking Bad*, six assorted television episodes, and eight movies met inclusion criteria to be coded for emerging discourses (see Table 1 for details on the included media).

Table 1. Fictional Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Source</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of Amphetamine Use</th>
<th>Discourse of Enhancement?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Novel</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knoerle, John. <em>Crystal Meth Cowboys</em>.</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopkins, Ellen. <em>Crank</em></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopkins, Ellen. <em>Glass</em></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heim, Scott. <em>We Disappear</em></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daum, Meghan. <em>The Quality of Life Report</em></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chappell, Crissa-Jean. <em>Total Constant Order</em>.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Ritalin</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn, Tracy. <em>Rx</em></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Ritalin, Adderall</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlson, Melody. <em>Diary of a Teenage Girl: Road Trip</em>.</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Ritalin, Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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3 Amphetamine use, as described in early sections of this paper, has a long history but reemerged in the American public consciousness as a major public health threat in the 1990s.

4 I defined *contemporary use* as use occurring during the same general time period as the artifact was created. This ensured that the social constructions not only reflect contemporary perspectives about use, but contemporary perspectives about use *today*. Because amphetamines have such a long and dynamic history in the U.S., it is important to focus in particular on their constructions in today’s social and temporal context.
Table 1. Fictional Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of Amphetamine Use</th>
<th>Discourse of Enhancement?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lindquist, Mark. <em>The King of Methlehem.</em></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cole, David. <em>Scorpion Rain.</em></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Ritalin</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Television</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilligan, Vince. <em>Breaking Bad</em>, Seasons 1-3 (all episodes)</td>
<td>2008-2010</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zakrzewski, A. <em>Cold Case</em>, Season 4, Episode 14</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donahue, Ann and Zuiker, Anthony E. <em>CSI: Las Vegas</em>, Season 9, Episode 16</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donahue, Ann and Zuiker, Anthony E. <em>CSI: Las Vegas</em>, Season 9, Episode 22</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donahue, Ann and Zuiker, Anthony E. <em>CSI: Las Vegas</em>, Season 10, Episode 3</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donahue, Ann and Zuiker, Anthony E. <em>CSI: Las Vegas</em>, Season 4, Episode 19</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Ritalin</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Movie</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaffer, Jeff. <em>Eurotrip</em></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Benzedrine</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasdan, Jake. <em>Orange County</em></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Ritalin, Speed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anderson, Paul Thomas. <em>Magnolia</em></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Dexedrine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyle, Allan. <em>Empire Records</em></td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Prescription? Speed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sader, Marty. <em>Most High</em></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Åkerlund, Jonas. <em>Spun</em></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caruso, D.J. <em>The Salton Sea</em></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Methamphetamine</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

I coded data inductively and deductively using tenets of critical discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism. In the first round of coding, I coded all media that met the basic inclusion criteria (1-3...
above) for references to amphetamine use. Foss (2009) suggests data should be coded for themes that emerge frequently and/or intensely. Through this first round of coding, I narrowed the sample to only those resources in which discourses on amphetamines were significant according to these criteria—they either constituted a regular, recurring theme or an important statement about plot or character.

In the second round of coding, I followed Bright et al.’s lead and coded inductively for discourses pertaining to subject positions and ideologies about the drug itself. Subject positions are defined as “social roles implicitly defined within discourses that stipulate how the person being spoken about can or cannot talk, write or act” (2008, p. 136). Subject positions are key to understanding the social expectations placed on a person or group of people (Foucault, 1972; McHoul & Grace, 1997). Specific passages were coded and included in a spreadsheet for further analysis in the third round. Examples of important subject position categories that emerged are: motivations, gender, social class/status, and sexual orientation and behavior.

In the third round of coding, I deductively coded passages that had been identified and the emergent discourses for ideologies pertaining to “enhancement.” Because the idea of enhancement pertains to meeting social expectations and fulfilling social norms, for this part of the analysis, I coded for all ways amphetamines were used by “normal” or “average” people (Wolpe, 2002) with the express intent of meeting those expectations.

Once enhancement-related discourses were identified, I examined them for patterns and the themes or meanings revealed by these patterns. In some media, it was not explicit whether the drug was prescription or illegally produced and in others it was unclear whether the person using was ill or “normal.” In these cases, because the drugs were tablets for oral consumption and issues of provider corruption emerged as well, I included the discourses with those related to off-label consumption of prescription amphetamines.

Findings

Two important themes emerged from this analysis that construct amphetamine use and users in ways that reflect, legitimize and reproduce class and gender ideologies. First, discourses revealed that the distinct meanings of illegally produced methamphetamine versus prescription amphetamines are linked to expectations regarding the respective socioeconomic class and social status of users. Second, the discourses reflect gendered values and ideals, especially with regard to productivity and sexuality.

Social Class and Methamphetamine versus Prescription Amphetamine Use

In the popular media artifacts that I analyzed, methamphetamine users were typically constructed as low-income while prescription amphetamine users were nearly universally constructed as upper-middle-class. Taken in isolation, this distinction is neither problematic nor entirely inaccurate. However, it becomes disciplining force because the two drug categories are
constructed as having not only different social but moral significance (Philippe Bourgois, 2000). Methamphetamine use, much like heroin or crack in the past, is constructed as a problem of moral deviance and thus its users as deviants. Prescription amphetamine use, on the other hand, is constructed as an admirable attempt to succeed in a troubled system. As a result, while methamphetamine users are held individually responsible for their addiction, users of prescription amphetamines are constructed as blameless.

These constructions of the methamphetamine user are evidenced by the following patterns:

1. Compared to Enhancement-related motivations of methamphetamine users are rarely addressed, and when they are, they are insignificant to plot or character development and/or serve as comic relief.
2. Discourses fail to situate the methamphetamine users’ enhancement-related activities in the broader social and structural contexts that encourage or necessitate them.
3. Discourses reveal anxiety about methamphetamine use transcending class boundaries.

Six (37.5%) out of sixteen media sources that included important discourses on methamphetamine use failed to address issues of enhancement, compared with only two (20%) of ten discourses on prescription amphetamine use. In addition to the lower frequency of enhancement discourse in the constructions of methamphetamine, the tone accompanying those that were present was often comical or condescending. This glossing over of enhancement discourses in constructions of methamphetamine use undermines the cultural and structural significance of these motivations (Grinspoon & Hedblom, 1975; Pine, 2007). Together, these patterns represent a tacit acceptance of a system of social inequality and exploitative labor relations. Anxiety that methamphetamine will transcend class boundaries parallels a similar concern about crack cocaine use in the mid-1980s, reflecting and reinforcing ideas of cross-class contamination and corruption (Reinarman & Levine, 1997a, 1997b). The following passages from The Quality of Life Report (Daum, 2003) address all three patterns as the upper-class hosts of a New York morning television show discuss the show’s new topic among themselves, then on camera:

“I’m sending you to the Midwest,” she said. “There’s a very dangerous drug there that women are doing to help them lose weight and clean the house. Basically, it’s coke for the Payless shoes set. It sounds disgusting and I’m sure you can find a bunch of disgusting people who will talk on camera and give the show a dose of realness. . . .”

Experts say that if the trend continues, meth will claim more and more victims in the Midwest and then make its way east. . . . A scary thought, because, as these women have told us, meth can make you lose a lot more than a few extra pounds. You can lose your life. Back to the studio.” . . . “Although I gotta say, I wouldn’t mind weighing 104,” Bonnie said. “Wouldn’t we all,” said Samantha. (Daum, 2003, p. 115)
The above passages simultaneously belittle the typically poor and working-class women who use methamphetamine and their enhancement-related motivations for use. They attribute decisions to use methamphetamine to individual characteristics in such a way that class biases persist. In addition to being referred to as “disgusting”, users are associated with stereotyped behaviors such as promiscuity and criminality that are often treated as inherent to those of lower socioeconomic status (Reinarman & Levine, 1997b). Methamphetamine itself is then linked to this lower social status. In many constructions of methamphetamine use, the drug is given a “rightful” place among the poor and working class. In the novel *Crystal Meth Cowboys*, a male middle-class disk jockey is said to have a long history of using powder cocaine to stay up all night working. When he is unable to access his standard supply and must resort to using methamphetamine instead, he is said to be “slumming” (Knoerle, 2003, p. 117).

Middle-class methamphetamine users rarely appear in the artifacts I examined, and when they do, they are framed according to a distinct discourse of vulnerability rather than immorality that reveals generalized anxiety that this poor and working-class drug is invading the sanctuary of the economically well-off. In an episode of the television show *Cold Case*, police officers suspect a young, middle-class girl of using methamphetamine. In this instance, the individual quality of “superachiever” is assumed to motivate enhancement-seeking motivations for methamphetamine use. Consistent with the above discourses of enhancement (i.e., weight loss), the social pressures that may contribute to or exacerbate such a quality are not discussed, but the girl’s motivations are deemed admirable and her lack of anticipation of the dangers of the drug as naive.

- “A superachiever like Madison, could’ve used meth to pull all-nighters.”
- “That’s how it usually starts. Next thing you know you’re hooked to the grave.” (Zakrzewski, 2007)

The poor and working-class women who use methamphetamine in Daum’s (2003) novel are abominations with the capacity to contaminate. Yet, the middle-class girl in Zakrzewski’s *Cold Case* (2007) is constructed as naive and vulnerable to contamination. Both portrayals of methamphetamine use reveal growing social concern that methamphetamine is transcending its “rightful” place among the economically oppressed.

This anxiety is further evidenced in Ellen Hopkins’ young adult novels, *Crank* (2004) and *Glass* (2007), which follow a middle-class teen, Kristina, in her downward spiral of methamphetamine addiction. While she does sometimes use the drug with middle-class friends, she is introduced to it within her father’s working-class environment and most often uses with rural, poor and socially marginalized people. Thus, Kristina’s addiction, poverty, criminality and failed social roles are constructed as the result of exposure to a dangerous substance and, arguably, dangerous people.

In discourses of methamphetamine, as in those of crack cocaine in the past, poverty, criminality and sexual deviance are constructed as individual weaknesses triggered by a particular drug
rather than the result of inequitable power and economic structures (Humphries, 1999; Murphy & Rosenbaum, 1997; Reinarman & Levine, 1997a). These discourses construct danger in a familiar way. Much like the creation of fear in contemporary horror movies, methamphetamine use is presented as a dangerous transformative force that releases the monster within (Nachbar & Lause, 1992). In turn, methamphetamine users’ submission is deemed either morally weak or naively vulnerable, depending on their social class—characteristics of the individual, not society, are held responsible for methamphetamine abuse and addiction.

Conversely, enhancement-related discourses about prescription amphetamine use critique not the individual, but the social and structural pressures that underlie motivations for using. This is revealed through the following three patterns that emerged in the data:

1. Prescription amphetamine users’ enhancement-related motivations are central to plot and character development.
2. Enhancement-related motivations are treated seriously.
3. Discourses explicitly recognize and often critique the social and structural factors that encourage use.

In the following passages from the novel Rx, an upper-middle-class high school student explains her and others’ motivations for using Ritalin even though they do not have prescriptions for the drug. Ritalin is an amphetamine derivative prescribed to treat attention deficit disorders (i.e., ADD, ADHD) that helps those with the disorders focus. However, it acts as a stimulant on those who are “healthy” or “normal,” decreasing interest in sleep or food and making tedious tasks more interesting (Rasmussen, 2008). The motivations presented in Rx reflect the most pressing motivation that researchers consistently find underlying illicit use of prescription stimulants—academic, and ultimately professional, achievement.

Great jobs only come from going to a good school. Getting into a good school means getting good grades. Like this exam. Which is good. But it also means getting a good score on the SATs . . . Otherwise, how would I get a corner office? (Lynn, 2006, p. 234)

In reality, students are increasingly turning to prescription amphetamines to improve academic performance and also to balance work, school and social obligations (McCabe, et al., 2005; Quintero & Nichter, 2011; Quintero, et al., 2006). In the film Empire Records, the social and familial pressures that lead to one high-school girl’s addiction to prescription stimulants are explicitly problematized. In the example below, one of the film’s main characters, Corey, expresses her frustration over the endless expectations and pressures her father places on her to always excel academically.

*Corey, an upbeat, Harvard-bound employee at the record store, receives a delivery of flowers. She reads the card aloud,* “To the number 1 in her class,
Discourses about prescription amphetamine use also address the often inaccurate beliefs many youth hold about the safety the drugs’ safety. When pressed to explain their preference for prescription over illegally produced amphetamines, students express beliefs that prescription drugs--because they are produced in labs and endorsed by physicians--are safe even when used improperly or without a prescription (DeSantis & Hane, 2010). In the following passage from *Rx*, this common belief is recognized, and its accuracy is challenged.

And how many were like me, jittery with Ritalin, still dosing themselves even though the hardest parts were over? Scratch that. How many were exactly like me, honestly believing that your brain and body could be enhanced, no downsides, with prescription drugs that no doctor ever prescribed for us? How many believed that prescription drugs were safer than Ecstasy, acid, and coke because they were FDA approved? (Lynn, 2006, p. 244).

Prescription amphetamines, even when used illegally, appear to have a distinct social meaning relative to methamphetamine. Rather than being seen as a social problem in and of themselves, they are constructed as a symptom of greater social issues such as excessive pressure on youth to succeed and a consumer-oriented materialistic culture. This construction and the social challenges that contribute to it make room for attempts to understand the potential dangers associated with amphetamine use but do not blame individual weakness or immorality. Furthermore, they facilitate the challenging of inaccurate beliefs held about the safety of engaging in illicit use of prescription amphetamines.

Overall, these are positive things. However, when juxtaposed with the discourses of individual responsibility and immorality that dominate constructions of methamphetamine use, they reflect social inequities that have always dominated drug discourses in the U.S. From the demonizing of opium dens to the blaming of alcohol and later crack for poverty, violence and criminality, drugs have been scapegoats “for problems whose complicated origins lay in broader political and economic conditions” (Reinarman & Levine, 1997b) simply because of their concentration among marginalized and oppressed social classes.

*Enhancement, the Gendered Construction of Productivity, and the Production of the Ideal Body*

In addition to linking particular amphetamines to class-specific meanings and behaviors, enhancement discourses of amphetamines in popular fiction construct male and female users differently. These differences fall into two categories: division of labor and ideal bodies.

Enhancement-related discourses about female amphetamine use contribute to the reproduction of a hegemonic ideal of feminine perfection. Women’s motivations for and desired outcomes from use constructed in relation to a multiplicity of interconnected obligations, all of which contain
elements of subordination and objectification. Social expectations of women’s productivity are much broader than those of their male counterparts, extending to domestic, professional and social spheres. The following passage from the film *Empire Records* illustrates social admiration for the controlled amphetamine addict who is able to balance a plethora of expectations and obligations.

- **Corey emerges from her upper middle class home. She is well-dressed, slim, and attractive. She carries a pan of cupcakes as she approaches Gina’s car,**
  “Surprise!” and gives her a cupcake.
- **Gina asks,** “When did you have time to make these?”
- **Corey replies,** “There’s 24 useful hours in every day, thank you!” (Moyle, 1995)

In the above scene, which occurs early in the film, the audience learns that Corey is attractive, youthful, domestic, cheerful and energetic. This same character is a Harvard-bound high school student who is employed part-time. Because she is still able to retain her more traditional feminine obligations of beauty and domesticity, she is deemed “perfect,” as evidenced in a later scene when a frustrated and envious friend publicly “outs” her for her amphetamine use.

“I know what you do! What’s this? What’s this? What are these? What are these? Aspirins? Vitamins? Breath mints? Diet pills? . . . You know what, I could study all night . . . if I was chowing down speed, too, you know that I could.” *Throwing the pills at Corey,* “Here’s one for your perfect little face! And your perfect body! And your perfect family and your perfect school! And your perfect, perfect future!” (Moyle, 1995)

Another example of the reinforcement of women’s domestic responsibilities is present in the novel *The Quality of Life Report.* In the following passage, a single mother who formerly used methamphetamine discusses her motivations for using methamphetamine.

People told me I looked good. I had so much energy. I stayed up all night and cleaned the house. I tweaked so hard I scraped the pattern off the kitchen counter. But I was spending five hundred dollars a week on meth.” (Daum, 2003, pp. 113-114)

In the novel *Rx,* the main character, Thyme, expounds upon the expectations she feels she and those around her must ultimately meet. While amphetamine use is viewed as a means of meeting her academic needs, this is situated in a world of pressures to excel in many ways and in many domains.

These were who I was supposed to be when I grew up. Sort of rich. Sort of married. Career oriented, or family oriented - no, wait: these days both oriented, with a high passion for each. Good clothes. Big car. Sufficient etiquette. Familiarity with the parts of a boat. McMansion with four bedrooms. Crazed
workout habits to keep youthful body. Crazy BOTOX to keep youthful face. (Lynn, 2006, p. 188)

Thus, the ideal of productivity that is legitimized and perpetuated by enhancement-related discourses of women’s amphetamine use pertains to the broad spectrum of domestic and professional or academic spheres. The construction of male productivity, however, is limited to academic or professional work. Methamphetamine’s link to male, working class productivity is illustrated in the following passage from the novel *Crystal Meth Cowboys*.

> What ol’ Danny’d do is mainline a major load of meth on Monday morning, throw open the doors to his shop and take all corners. And man you should have seen the display of 60’s muscle cars that lined up in that lot. . . . Anyway ol’ Danny he’d work around the clock for five straight days, shooting up every few hours, then crash to earth on a tidal wave of beer close of business Friday. (Knoerle, 2003, p. 118)

Men’s economic productivity is also central to the plot and character development in the methamphetamine-based television series, *Breaking Bad*. The story centers around a man whose unfortunate economic (he is an underpaid high school chemistry teacher) and health (he develops lung cancer) circumstances lead him to begin cooking methamphetamine to provide for his family. Although the show focuses on production rather than use, the frequency and intensity of this work related discourse supports the notion that, for men, productive capacity is built around ability to provide for or support one’s family.

The distinction between male and female productivity in the discourses of enhancement-related amphetamine use reflect and reproduce traditional gendered divisions of labor. Because domestic productivity is strictly relegated to female users, the persistent expectation that women alone are responsible for domestic roles is legitimized (Weedon, 1997). Furthermore, women are held responsible for achieving both domestic and professional (or academic) success (Hartsock, 2003; Weedon, 1997). Historically, when female drug users have fail to fulfill their domestic “obligations,” they have been demonized in popular media and political rhetoric (Humphries, 1999; Reinarman & Levine, 1997a, 1997b) as well as lived experience (Philippe Bourgois, 2003; Flavin & Paltrow, 2010; Mauer, Potler, & Wolf, 1999; Murphy & Rosenbaum, 1999). On the other hand, men who find themselves unable to fulfill their constructed role as economic provider find themselves emasculated in addition to being poor and marginalized (Philippe Bourgois, 2003; P Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009).

In addition to revealing and legitimizing men’s and women’s use of amphetamines to fulfill their roles pertaining to productivity, the artifacts construct users’ ideal bodies as those produced or enhanced by amphetamine use. While several of the above passages emphasized women’s productivity, they also indicate that women’s bodies must fulfill certain expectations and obligations. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the production of ideal female bodies and passive female sexuality as evidenced by discourses of amphetamine use.
Discourses about female amphetamine users frequently portray use as a means of meeting the Western or European physical ideal of slim female beauty (Becker, Burwell, Herzog, Hamburg, & Gilman, 2002; Edmonds, 2010). In the novel The King of Methlehem, when a methamphetamine cook asks a young user about what kinds of drugs girls her age use, she discusses the appeal of methamphetamine’s anorectic properties.

- “Mushrooms, when we can find ‘em. Weed, of course. Ecstasy. Some girls like meth.”
- “You?”
- “What?”
- “You like meth?”
- “Of course.”
- “You’re a little young for meth,” he says, testing.
- “I know plenty of girls my age who use it.”
- “Yeah?”
- “It helps you stay skinny and stuff.”
- “Yeah, that’s true.” (Lindquist, 2007, p. 76)

The social requirements for beauty do not permit even older women to be heavy. In the following passage from the film Requiem for a Dream, a lonely widow has decided she needs to lose weight before her appearance on a television game show. After a number of unsuccessful diets, Mrs. Goldfarb decides to visit the “diet doctor” recommended by her friends in hopes of acquiring prescribed amphetamines.

- Mrs. Goldfarb arrives at the diet doctor’s office. “Why are you here Mrs. Goldfarb?” The nurse asks.
- “I’m enormous.”
- The nurse leaves and the doctor comes in and notes, “You’re a little overweight.”
- “I have fifty pounds I’d be willing to donate.” (Aronofsky, 2000)

Although Mrs. Goldfarb’s use of amphetamines is prescribed, the visual imagery and her son’s explicit criticism indicate that the doctor’s prescription of amphetamines for weight loss is problematic. This questioning of the credibility of the physician does implicitly challenge the enhancement-related motivations for use. Requiem for a Dream can be classified as an independent, low-budget film (Nash, 2010) with the potential to represent an alternative discourse. Nonetheless, while the film does question Mrs. Goldfarb’s desire to lose weight, because she is otherwise constructed as a lonely, emotionally insecure, and naive woman, the social pressures that underly her motivations are not addressed.

The historical link between controlled amphetamine use and female perfection is explicitly defined in the opening scene of the film The Salton Sea. The narrator informs the audience over
an image of a vacant-eyed woman, who is smoking a cigarette while polishing a floor in high heels, full makeup, and a dress, that she epitomizes the amphetamine user.

“Now that’s a classic speed freak for you - skinny and cleaning house. I bet her poor husband never knew what hit him in the sack either.” (Caruso, 2002)

This perfect women represented in the above scene--admittedly, mocked somewhat by the imagery--is domestic, slim, and sexually passive. The idealized female body is thus defined only according to its aesthetics and its status as a passive object (Weedon, 1997) subject to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975, 2001). The requirement for sexual submission is most clearly evidenced in a scene from the movie Spun. In this scene, a main character, Ross, engages in aggressive sex with a peripheral character, April. Both are active participants in the interaction and both appear to use methamphetamine to enhance their enjoyment. However, when Ross abruptly handcuffs April to the bed and leaves (Åkerlund, 2003), he punishes her for her active role as sexual agent and relegates her to her status as sexual object subordinate to his desire (McHoul & Grace, 1997; Mulvey, 1975, 2001).

In contrast to the ideal female body, which is constructed as something that is and should be powerless, the ideal male body is constructed as aggressive and powerful. In keeping with this, male sexuality is active and dominant. In the following passage from Crystal Meth Cowboys, the amphetamine-enhanced male body is characterized by physical prowess.

“I said before that the subject couldn’t have fired a weapon with his shot-up shoulder to the best of my knowledge. But methamphetamine intoxication at that level is the equivalent of dark matter. . . . . the point of this dissertation is that a human body subject to that much meth is capable of almost anything this side of winged flight.” (Knoerle, 2003)

Male aggression and power is also constructed as desirable when it relates to sex. The following passage from Crystal Meth Cowboys portrays male methamphetamine users as sexually aggressive and physically desirable.

“I’d get these phone calls out of the blue,” said Florence. “Bob, he was in town, could he see me. He had to see me. Sometimes I’d go. I never suspected drugs. I thought he was just like that.” “What? Insatiable?” “Yes.” (Knoerle, 2003, pp. 193-195)

Similarly, in the scene from Spun described above, the male body is enhanced by the aggressive sexual energy that results from methamphetamine use, whereas the female body is debauched. Ross’ aggression builds throughout the scene and he ultimately expresses his domination over April by covering her eyes and mouth with duct tape, handcuffing her to the bed, and leaving for hours to work (Åkerlund, 2003). This tips the power balance in the sexual encounter (and their relationship) toward the male and violently reminds April of her required subordination.
The construction of the ideal male body as active, powerful, and dominant in juxtaposition to female passivity, weakness, and subordination reinforces gender roles that are not only philosophically problematic (Weedon, 1997) but that have been demonstrated to be particularly troubling in the context of contemporary poverty. The overemphasis on the male role as protector and aggressor is emasculating and marginalizing for lower SES men who may lack agency as “providers” (Philippe Bourgois, 2003).

Discussion

Two key themes emerged from this analysis enhancement-related discourses in popular media representations of amphetamine use and users: the maintenance of class distinctions between illegally produced methamphetamine and prescription amphetamines; and the distinct differences between gendered ideals of productivity and the body. These findings reveal important assumptions that legitimize and reinforce existing inequities in class and gender status in the United States.

The Maintenance of Class

Though illegally produced methamphetamine use often transcends social class, affecting those from all walks of life, relative to its prescription counterparts, it is more likely to be used by lower and middle SES individuals (Joe, 1996; Pine, 2007). Prescription amphetamines, especially Adderall and Ritalin, are more likely to be used by college students of higher relative SES (Hall, Irwin, Bowman, Frankenberger, & Jewett, 2005; McCabe, et al., 2005). The relative degrees of stigma evident in policy and public concern about methamphetamine (ColoradoMethProject, 2010; MethResources, 2010) versus prescription amphetamines are arguably a reflection of a social distaste not only for methamphetamine, but for the lower socioeconomic classes of American society who are more likely to engage in its use, much like the distinctions that were made in the 1980s between cocaine and crack (Linnemann, 2009; Pine, 2007). The major prevention efforts that target middle-class youth reveal a desire to stop the spread of methamphetamine into the wealthier suburbs (Project, 2010).

The tacit acceptance of productivity-related enhancement motivations for methamphetamine use is juxtaposed with the often explicit challenge of the productivity-related enhancement motivations among prescription amphetamine users. This legitimizes and consequently perpetuates the United States’ hegemonic ideals that value certain kinds of work and people over others. While those occupying the lower socioeconomic strata are required to engage in excessive labor as a means of achieving upward social mobility or just to make ends meet (Crampton, et al., 2008; Pine, 2007), discourses that fail to problematize the structural factors of the political economy (i.e., exploitative labor, profit motive, and emphasis on personal responsibility) that make this necessary (Marx, 2003) reinforce the oppressed social position of the lower and working class American who is represented by by the methamphetamine user. Conversely, many of the media discourses analyzed explicitly challenge the social pressures that
drive young, upper-middle-class students to engage in prescription amphetamine use for the express purpose of academic enhancement. This reinforces the notion that those with privilege “deserve” it not because of merit or effort but because of their social and economic status. In fact, personal responsibility (so central to the constructions of methamphetamine users) is virtually absent as the idea that these privileged youth are engaging in substance use to meet social expectations is represented as an indication of significant social problems.

Producing Ideal Women and Men

The differences between enhancement-related discourses about amphetamine using women and men provide a window into persistent social expectations about gender. Women’s use of stimulant drugs has long been viewed complexly by society; some stimulant effects are idealized (e.g., slenderness) while others are problematized (e.g., aggression).

Modern American women are expected to fulfill a number of domestic and professional roles (Hartsock, 2003; Weedon, 1997) while maintaining a slim figure and positive attitude (Grinspoon & Hedblom, 1975). The fact that these social expectations are often central to real women’s use of methamphetamine to maintain their responsibilities in what Hartsock (2003) calls subsistence labor as well as childrearing has been established (Joe, 1996), so these discourses may be accurate reflections of many women’s lived experiences. However, because most of these enhancement-related discourses are again not situated in broader social and structural contexts, they simultaneously serve to legitimize the idea that women must meet often unrealistic expectations to fulfill their gender roles adequately. At the same time, the idea that a husband may not be able to “handle” the increased sex drive that may result from amphetamine use reinforces the notion that women should maintain a position as passive sexual objects rather than active sexual agents (McHoul & Grace, 1997; Mulvey, 1975, 2001).

Men, on the other hand, are expected to fulfill their roles as protectors, predators, and providers. The enhancement-related discourses that emerge in this study about men’s amphetamine use reinforce the need for men to enhance their physical and sexual prowess and accept the idea that men must engage in often excessive labor activities to meet fulfill social expectations. This construction of masculinity, so readily accepted in the discourses, is arguably problematic for both women and men. For many men, especially those in the lower socioeconomic classes, it may be unrealistic to successfully serve as a provider or to be physically present to either protect or seduce a partner (Philippe Bourgois, 2003). In addition, these expectations of male dominance further perpetuate the image of the idealized woman as passive and subordinate.

Strengths & Limitations

Most research that has looked at popular constructions of amphetamine use thus far has used news media as the sole source. This study provides an alternative source of discourses in popular fictional media that is still fundamental in shaping people’s perceptions, including those of policy makers. In addition, because both inductive and deductive coding methods were used,
discourses and their particular significance were identified that may had been missed had I only coded for discourses of enhancement.

Weaknesses of this study related largely to the sampling procedures used. Novels were chosen using convenience samples because fictional books addressing amphetamine use were difficult to find. Thus, all qualified books that were identified were incorporated. Additionally, films and television shows that were incorporated primarily came from crime and drama genres. There may be different portrayals in comedy or other genres if one were to include passing references to the drugs, but these were excluded. The limited genres in the study thus may result in a bias toward especially negative portrayals of the drugs. Finally, there were more books, films, and television shows focusing on methamphetamine than prescription amphetamines. This can be seen as biasing results, but should also be recognized as a reflection of the relative extent to which each drug group has already been constructed as a social problem.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the ways that the enhancement-related discourses about amphetamines that are contained in the popular media may reflect, legitimize and reproduce hegemonic ideals. Despite the fact that amphetamines have been used in the U.S. to varying degrees of social, legal, and medical acceptance for nearly a century, their social meanings are often overlooked. In this study, I sought to complement existing work on the lived experiences and epidemiology of amphetamine use as well as the prolific body of data on drugs in the media by analyzing the construction of amphetamine use and users in popular fiction, film and television. The constructions that emerged reveal significant concerns about class, morality and gender that have the power to influence lived experience as well as policy and prevention efforts through the production of stigma (Bayer, 2008; Gamson, et al., 1992; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; A. Schneider & Ingram, 1993; J. W. Schneider, 1985).

In reality, the U.S.’s cultural and political-economic contexts may actually encourage the use of both prescription and illegally produced amphetamines to meet a variety of social expectations and economic needs (DeSantis & Hane, 2010; Grinspoon & Hedblom, 1975; Pine, 2007). However, many policy and prevention efforts surrounding amphetamine use disproportionately target methamphetamine users and women in particular. Because policy and prevention efforts can be influenced as much by social values as by data (Bonsignore, et al., 2006; Pentz, 2006; Quintero & Nichter, 2011; A. Schneider & Ingram, 1993), it is important to examine the many arenas in which social are produced and disseminated.

This critical analysis of popular media discourses reveals several key ways that popular discourses could influence or legitimize the disparate policies and prevention efforts around amphetamine use. The social constructions of use and users reflect and reproduce existing class and gender-related inequalities and prejudices, perhaps hindering calls for more compassionate, data-driven approaches (Hohman, Oliver, & Wright, 2004; Murphy & Rosenbaum, 1999; Pentz, 2006). Understanding the social constructions of populations and how these constructions
reinforce existing inequities is an important step toward addressing these calls. In future studies, researchers can further these efforts by directly examining the impact of these constructions on policy, stigma, and on the lived experiences and subjectivities of users themselves.
Bibliography


