

Chrome World, Chrome Magic

By Sarah MacLean

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My PhD study (with the same title as this article) investigated how people talk about the experience of chroming (paint sniffing) in Melbourne. I conducted 37 interviews involving 28 young people aged 13–24 years who had experience of inhalant use and were engaged with treatment or welfare agencies, and an additional 10 interviews youth and drug workers. Some of the young people's discussions of chroming are included as quotes below.

Most people know very little about chroming and find it hard to understand why people would use these substances as drugs other than out of sheer desperation. Many of the young people I spoke with talked of chroming as an effective means of escaping intolerable life circumstances such as homelessness. As one young woman put it:

"It's like you're not even there. Like you don't exist. It's unbelievable ... I mean literally, [you've got] no mind, no body, you're gone. You're not there."

Yet young people involved in the research also spoke of actively managing how intensively they inhaled paint fumes to experience their lives in new and (at least temporarily) exciting ways. Most spoke of repeatedly enjoying an intense physical rush. Some reported inhaling less intensively to enjoy vivid hallucinations, with many referring to hallucinatory states as 'chrome world'. In this world they found themselves imbued with 'chrome magic': the effect of spray paint intoxication to make anything they imagined feel real – like being in a movie or on TV. One young man explained that he could imagine being a part of his favourite television programs while intoxicated with paint:

"You close your eyes and then you just say something out. And then you're in the TV. You're really in TV."

Many chromers played hallucinatory games with friends, inspired by characters, images and storylines drawn from popular culture. Some felt their bodies become as strong as those of superheroes. Others loved traveling across Melbourne on trains while intoxicated on spray paint:

"The good thing about the trains was, you know graffiti and that? When we were buzzing off our heads we'd see the colours just stream past. It was sort of, just

the colours, just seeing the colours just go past. And like when you're straight you won't be able to see it. But when you're like full buzzing it's like a little stream of light just going 'pshhhhhh', 'pshhhhhh', 'pshhhhhh'."

Like other forms of prolonged and intensive drug use, over time young people who chromed found that they no longer enjoyed the experience as much, but rather continued out of habit or a desire to become intoxicated. At this point chroming generally became less of a fun group activity and much more isolating and stigmatising: 'it [chrome] makes young people want to do it with their friends. But soon their friends will leave them and they'll just be doing it on their own'.

Indeed young people who had chromed for some years spoke of a debilitating sense of shame related to chroming and even of abuse and derision from other drug users. They spoke of embarrassment at the smell and sight of being covered with paint and remorse about being violent to others while intoxicated. Some felt they had ruined their future lives through damaging their brains and bodies. *'It's disgusting, I'm disgusted by it and I wish I never done it'*, lamented one young man.

Inhalant users frequently told me that chroming is reasonably acceptable for young people in protective care until they reach their late-teens. Those who continued past this time became increasingly despairing about themselves and their capacity to alter drug use. Surprisingly a number of ex-chromers observed that witnessing someone else chrome made them so angry they would assault that person. For instance, as a young woman told me:

"I've been violent, very violent. When I see a chromer I turn off. I see red actually. It's like I want to attack. I remember hitting. I bashed my sister because she come to my house chromed off her head. I couldn't help it."

For a young woman who had chromed for many years, being abused or berated for chroming intensified her sense of failure and isolation and made it even harder to stop:

"It makes you feel really low. And you feel like you're not worth shit because people do that. Unless you're really comfortable it quite often makes you chrome more because you can't, you can't hack what people have said. And it makes you want to hide ... Like when [a friend] said some horrible things a couple of years back, I was just, it really made me feel like I was a dickhead when I'm not. I felt sick, I was crying. I chromed a hell of a lot more after that."

Some ex-users in my study spoke of how gaining a sense of social inclusion helped them reduce their drug use. Three participants told me they stopped chroming immediately when grandparents or a sibling) let them move into a family home and took an interest in their welfare. Others without family support valued ongoing contact with workers very highly. One young man told me that when workers made repeated efforts to contact young people, 'they feel like they're needed or they're good enough to stop'. Moving onto other drug use was another factor in ceasing regular inhalant use for participants in my study.

Responding to inhalant use is difficult and controversial. It is a very complex task, but drug workers and policy makers need to take care to acknowledge the various pleasures of inhalant use and to offer a mix of interventions. Responses should offer attractive alternative activities and assist people to develop a sense of inclusion as well as altering the life circumstances (homelessness, poverty loneliness or abuse) that appear to make chroming attractive for some people.

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