A cultural view of drug use

There are a wide variety of drugs that are used recreationally in Australia. Some, such as alcohol and tobacco, are tolerated by our society, and have become the foundations of large industries. Others, including cannabis and heroin, are controlled through legislation and the prosecution of users.

This is the situation that has existed in Australia for most of our history. Tobacco and alcohol have always been legal, and as other drugs have been introduced to our society, they are generally illegalised quite quickly.

However, the situation is very different elsewhere. Each culture develops its own philosophy towards the use of drugs, which is based on various social traditions. For example, drugs may have religious significance for a cultural group, or play some other important role in daily life.

Think of the members of the Rastafarian (or ‘Rasta’) religion in Jamaica. Cannabis is a sacramental herb to these people, and holds as much importance as the bread and wine of the Eucharist does to Christians. Likewise, peyote (a drug obtained from the mescal cactus) plays a central role in religious ceremonies of the Native American Church. However, both of these drugs are illegal in Australia and many other countries.

The legality of a drug can also change over time. Alcohol was prohibited in the United States in 1920, and remained illegal until 1933. The development of Prohibition reflected the widely held public view that alcohol was responsible for the increasing rates of crime, poverty and violence. Similarly, the drug ecstasy (MDMA) was used by various American psychotherapists from 1977 to 1985, until its growth as a ‘street drug’ prompted US officials to classify it as a controlled substance.

Each culture seems to have its own reasons and procedures for deciding which drugs will be tolerated (and legalised) and which drugs will be criminalised. But how are these decisions made?