

Psycho-Social Aspects of Drug Abuse by Modern Youth*

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Research in human behavior rarely lends itself to the scientific rigors which allow for definitive cause and effect answers even if they exist. Perhaps no facet of human life has a simple origin, and certainly that is true of behavior which involves all levels of personality function and social interaction such as occurs in drug abuse. Drug abuse undoubtedly is overdetermined behavior with multiple etiological factors in a constantly fluxuating interaction. Most observers agree that drug abuse by the youth has become a major problem, but differences arise when the sociological and psychological factors of etiology are discussed. The many concepts of etiology are more or less products of the individual observer's orientation and past experience, and therefore, they rarely are subject to cross validation.

It is essential to keep an open and skeptical approach and to avoid a single-minded dogmatic view which may lead to misidentification of the enemy and to corrective moves which are doomed to failure and which only further compound the situation. The immediate response of more stringent legal and punitive measures made by many of our communities is an example of this type of a move and its self-defeating nature.

The definition of the problem is, in itself, very indistinct. Is drug abuse a condition, a symptom of a condition, or a sign such as edema in cardiac failure? The adolescent user tends to disagree with all these possibilities. When does drug use become drug abuse? The adult definition, by and large, differs markedly from that of the adolescent. The 17 year old who smokes marijuana only on Saturday night

does not classify himself as a drug abuser, but he might so term an acquaintance who used the drug three times a week.

There are some areas of general agreement, however. We know that the per capita number of youthful drug users has risen markedly in the past decade. Drug use is seen at earlier and earlier ages, and there has been a change in the socio-economic status of the users of hard narcotics. For example, heroin use among middle class teenagers was quite uncommon three years ago, and it was an extreme rarity five years ago. It is now estimated that one to two percent of college students on the northeastern seaboard have used heroin to some extent, and the number of high school users from middle class families is continuing to increase.[†] The major concern with non-narcotic drug use was at the college level in 1964, but by 1967 it had become a concern in high schools, and today it is a problem of note at junior high levels. Parenthetically, the increase in the use of mood altering drugs by the young people has been paralleled by a rise in the suicide rate of adolescents in the last decade (Ross, 1969). Drugs were the major cause of adolescent deaths in New York City in 1969.

Let us examine some of the phenomena that may be operative in the behavior of today's youth and relate them to drug use. Each factor, obviously debatable, may bring to mind others of equal importance, and specificity and completeness are patently impossible.

Television is a form of sensory input with effects upon development still largely hypothetical. Dr. Sam Hayakawa of San Francisco State University, in a statement published in the *New York Times*, estimated

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[†] Unpublished random survey done at Rutgers University, Department of Student Health, 1969.

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that the average 16 year old has spent about 20 percent of his waking life watching television. This makes it quantitatively the greatest single influence impinging upon his developing central nervous system at the most crucial time. This influence virtually begins at birth and may be capable of programming the individual nervous system with attitudes and expectations which form the base of all future learning and behavior. The concept of imprinting demonstrated in lower animals cannot be translated directly over to man, but the possibility of a similar process spread over a longer period must be considered (Lorenz, 1952). Certainly there is evidence that the basic concept of gender identity is fixed before three years of age and that change rarely can be produced even when genitalia contradict assigned gender (Money, Hampson and Hampson, 1957). Basic personality disorders appear to be a product of the early years and to resist our efforts to change them. Other attitudes toward and ways of approaching life may be equally indelible and even more fundamental.

Television teaches the developing child that pleasure and gratification of his senses can occur instantaneously without his active involvement or expenditure of energy. The possible and the impossible are not sharply delimited, and the development of ego boundaries might be delayed. There are no reality limits to the world of fantasy, and magic beginnings and endings become a normal part of living. One simply turns on the machine, and ergo, one lives with an ever available Alladin's lamp. The drug culture was quick to adopt the phrase, "turn on" as indicative of an approach to life which includes gratification without effort or responsibility. "Tuning out" is another television phrase adopted by the drug culture to indicate an escape from reality living. It is possible that one of the earliest, the deepest, and the most indelible concepts imprinted upon the mind of today's youth is that of the ease and desirability of instantaneous and passive sensory gratification.

Television also furnishes the child an unlimited and ever-changing supply of identification figures and role models that are far more tangible and believable than those from a book or fantasy. The incorporation of these figures and their unreal or deviant characteristics could produce a major effect on the development of ego ideals and the super-ego.

The child reared in a television civilization also grows up in a nuclear family in which there is decreasing ability to escape the intensity of the family triangle. Industrialization, urbanization, and geographic mobility have all but destroyed the extended family of the past. An escape from the oedipal situation into the support of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and so forth, has become less and less possible. The family as a culture transmitter and as a microcosmic world in which to experiment with

future roles is becoming history. The television world first, then later the peer group and the school system with its teachers, counsellors and social workers, have become inadequate replacements for the old extended family. As family structure and authority has waned, these outside groups, always of great significance, have become more and more important to the developing child as sources of learning, support, guidance, and as repositories of values and standards.

These forces and social changes are part and parcel of almost unlimited affluence and complex technology. This affluence has produced not only an abundance of material goods and bodily comfort, it has had the even more important side effect of reducing the opportunities of the growing child to achieve mastery. Self-esteem is derived from many sources from birth onward, but one major origin is the growing organism's experience of overcoming frustrations and achieving goals by its own energy and activity. The more affluent the society, the less the opportunity exists for constructive mastery on the part of the young. Society will, in fact, discourage attempts at mastery when they conflict with what passes for progress, advancement, and social status. Children and young adolescents come to recognize that there is no constructive role for them to play in an affluent and crowded society which literally does not need people. For example; one junior league baseball team met one Saturday morning in the spring to clear its field of weeds with blade and sickle. This was vetoed by the adult leaders who quickly and efficiently cleared this field with power mowers. The children were denied an opportunity to master a task of great relevance to them and to achieve a notch toward self-growth.

Mastery and its attendant ego-growth through achievement may be associated with the relevancy of the task. An event or action which contributes fundamentally to the welfare of the family or the social group is worth far more than one contrived by well meaning adults to keep the youngsters out of trouble. Many of the activities of youth in an affluent and urbanized society are either contrived, aimless, or totally hedonistic. Not only do they rarely contribute to the welfare of the social unit, but they usually are obviously added expense and burden and/or furnish vicarious pleasure for the adults involved and are, therefore, self-defeating.

Our youth have approached adolescence larger, stronger, and intellectually brighter than ever before. Peter Blos, in his book, "On Adolescence," states that the period from puberty to adulthood is the time of experimentation and trial which leads either to mature resolution of childhood conflicts or to some form of compromise which ranges from a mild character disorder to a complete disaster (Blos, 1962). He states that the creativity and the imagination of

the human reach a peak during these vital years. Eugene Pumpian-Mindlin adds to this the concept of omnipotentiality as a characteristic of the normal adolescent (Pumpian-Mindlin, 1965). This refers to a boundless feeling of invulnerability and power not dulled by conflicting reality. Combine the concepts of Blos and Pumpian-Mindlin and you have a situation in which boundless energy, creativity and imagination are urged onward by a sense of power and invulnerability which does not recognize reality limits or time boundaries. All things are possible and future consequences of present behavior do not exist, or they must, by definition, exist only for others. This should tell us something about danger and punishment as deterrents to adolescent behavior.

Blos foresees a permissive and unstructured adolescence as producing adults of great potential for creative thought and imaginative living. A harshly limited and controlled adolescence, on the other hand, produces rigidity, inflexibility, lack of imagination and creativity—in other words a conformity to authority which we do not like to contemplate. It sounds, therefore, as if a totally permissive adolescent period is very desirable unless one wishes to crush and to warp those traits which symbolize progress and advancement in human interactions. There is, as one might expect, a catch to this otherwise obvious choice. Blos also states that there is a price to pay for the totally permissive and unstructured situation, and that price is a certain casualty rate among the young experimenters. The lack of reasonable structure and protective limits produces a high risk—high gain situation in which many simply will not survive.

Blos and Mindlin are referring to characteristic attributes of normal teenagers. Their concepts imply that the adolescent tends to ignore and to deny reality factors when they conflict with his fantasies and/or his desire for the pleasure principle and that he tends to depend upon his own private interpretation of the situation. The process of maturing necessitates some degree of structure and guidance, broadly flexible, to prevent damage and/or deviance in development. Unfortunately, the post World War II years have seen a marked decline in parental influence and responsibility. By and large, the youth have been free to explore, to experiment and to act without discipline and regulation. Old values and standards were dethroned before heirs were chosen to take their places. Society approached a state of anomie; a state in which normative standards of conduct and belief are weak or lacking. Durkheim spoke of anomie in the individual as a lack of society's influence on the basic passions, therefore, leaving the individual without a check-rein on behavior (Durkheim, 1951). He felt that this was a major factor in self-destructive behavior. The phrase, "doing one's thing," may be a concept which stems from a positive value upon and a

desire for individual freedom, but it also may be an anomic concept derived from the lack of the social and cultural guidelines that give one a sense of belonging. Perhaps the latter concept is more accurate when "doing one's thing" implies socially disapproved or destructive action.

These psychological influences and social changes have gone hand in hand with a concentration on the alleviation of discomfort and anxiety by external means. Madison Avenue has capitalized upon this trend and has flooded the media with encouragements to take Compoz for tension, Somnex for insomnia, No-Doz to awaken the next morning, and Alka-Seltzer for the discomfort caused by the other pills. The youngster, with a nervous system which is atuned from birth to the reception of television messages, has incorporated both the desirability of and the means of escape from discomfort into his basic concept of living. He learned so well to alleviate anxiety by oral means that he discovered new and more effective ways, and he improved upon the adult example by developing his own brand of tranquilizers and stimulants. One of his major methods of tranquilization, marijuana, not only is highly effective pharmacologically, but it also has the extremely important side effect of increasing the anxiety and tension of the adult world while it decreases his. He simultaneously thoroughly agitates his parents and other representatives of authority while becoming the central focus of society and its communication media. All the needed ingredients for positive reinforcement of behavior are present to insure its continuance.

The adolescent not only is able to defend his position on drug use with strength derived from adult examples, he simultaneously cannot develop the type of world perspective common to his elders. There are many factors operative here, but one is that today's youth are part of the first generation to see history as it occurs. Past generations learned of the major events of civilization after they had been embellished and distorted so as to obscure motives and to rationalize behavior. Good and bad were divided into definite camps in which the hero always won and the stranger was the villain. This can no longer be done to those who have a ring-side seat to history in the making via the television screen. All the frailties of adulthood and its world are laid bare so as to destroy the idealized image of childhood and to leave no God in its place.

Other perfectly realistic factors known to no previous generation have crashed in upon the young person so as to disenchant him with adult values and goals. The word "ecology" has rocketed to importance. Concepts barely mentioned a few years ago, environmental pollution, population explosion, a raped planet, all have become common knowledge of this genera-

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tion. These concepts, now almost axioms, were not invented by the youth, but they were quick to realize their validity and to look with a degree of just accusation and distrust at the adult world that produced them.

It would appear that the markedly increased use of chemical measures, either as a negative escape from reality or as a positive flight to the pleasure principle, is understandable if these hypotheses are correct. This does not mean that it is desirable unless one assumes a completely hopeless stance. On the contrary, survival in the future may require a degree of maturity and stability greater than ever before. This maturity requires the process of adolescence with its mastery of anxiety provoking situations, its search for a role in life, the amalgamation of sexual identity, and all of the attendant pains and discomforts. The adolescent period is one of emotional liability and transition during which the teenager is coming to grips with conflicts and confusions which, by their solution, will solidify his self-identity and his future social role (Erickson, 1956). This means that at no other period of life is a brain disorganizing drug more contraindicated. It is doubly dangerous if that drug presents an artificial solution to problems and allows an indefinite postponement of this essential process of reaching closure with one's own search for being. It does not appear logical to encourage an escape from this process of maturation.

Neither does it appear logical to fight an enemy whom one does not understand and to remain symptomatically oriented. If we are raising a group of sick youngsters, which is doubtful, then we must

assume that the contagious carrier is society and that drug abuse is only a symptom. If it is not true that we have a generation of sick youth, then it is possible that their behavior may be understood as a relatively rational response of pre-programmed minds to social and environmental changes of cataclysmic proportions. If that is so, again our attention must be turned toward our social structure. There will be a need for those of us who treat the individual youngster in trouble with drugs just as many of us treated the victims of polio a few years ago, but just as with polio, we must keep in mind that the ultimate goal is the understanding of and hopefully the control of the pathogenic process at its source.

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