

## Chapter 4

# The Sociologist Looks at Drug Use

### Defining "Drugs"

- Drugs can be defined:
- Materially: composition of the drugs, what the drug looks like and what it does.

Ex: Anything that causes an enhanced mental state

- Socially: How society constructs what is a drug. Changes from group to group or place to place.

### Medical Utility

- Medical definition (of a drug) = a substance that is used to by physicians to treat the body or mind
- Objective (essentialist) reality = for a drug to be used medically, it must act as a healing agent for the body
- Subjective (constructionist) reality = drug must be *recognized* as therapeutically useful by physicians. There is controversy over whether some drugs (marijuana, heroin...) are medically useful. Controversy in WV. WV has the smallest population but the biggest distribution of perscription drugs
- Based on a medical definition, heroin would not be considered a drug in the U.S., while penicillin would.
- A medical definition may determine a substance's legal status; if not useful, government / individual state more likely to make sale and possession a crime

### Illegality

- Illegality context= regards drugs as substances that are illegal to and possess or sell
- Largely a socially constructed definition of what drugs are; different substances will be defined as drugs in different jurisdictions or time periods
- Legal definitions of drugs may also depend on their physical or material properties; considered harmful because they are harmful
- Definition inadequate if we wish to examine full range of the use of psychoactive substances, that is, why drugs are used and what consequences this use has
  - Legal definition excludes alcohol (sale is authorized and controlled by the state), a psychoactive substance with strong connection to both use of illegal drugs and behaviors that illicit drugs cause/are correlated with

### Psychoactivity

- Psychoactive = influencing the workings of the mind, cognitive processes, and consequently, behavior
  - Any substance, regardless of medical or legal status, that significantly and pharmacologically alters the workings of the brain is a drug

- Pharmacology = the study of the effects of drugs on biological organisms

### Psychoactivity

- Points toward recreational use - the opposite of the medical context
- Psychoactivity is a matter of both degree and kind
- Pharmacologically speaking, alcohol is a drug in exactly the same way that cocaine and marijuana, which are illegal, are.

### Drug Use & Abuse

- Drug use = ingesting a given substance or set of substances in any quantity with any frequency over any period of time; covers the entire spectrum of consumption
- Difference between use and abuse?
- What is abuse?
- Any use of psychoactive substance outside a medical context?
- Or is drug abuse connected to level/type of use?

### Legal Instrumental Use

- 2 principal forms: over-the-counter and pharmaceutical
- Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are purchased directly by public on store shelves without a prescription, though they're not without their dangers
- Prescription drugs are prescribed by physicians to patients
  - Constitute a major source of psychoactive drug use
- If a drug is psychoactive, it rarely remains permanently confined to the context of approved medical usage
- Psychoactive drugs once OTC came to be used for the purpose of getting high
- Medical status of a drug may vary over time (medical marijuana)

### Legal Recreational Use

- Refers to the use of alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine; consumed for a desired psychic state
- Coffee drinking can be described as both recreational and instrumental
- Despite mixed motives for taking these drugs, subeuphoric pleasure cannot be discounted as a major reason for their use
- Extent of this type of use immense

### Illegal Instrumental Use

- Refers to taking drugs without a prescription for some instrumental purpose of which society approves - driving a truck, studying for an exam, etc.
- Taking drugs illegally but instrumentally connected to other illegal activities:
  - Script mill doctors - writing prescription for fee
  - Illicit, clandestine production - domestically and abroad
  - Illicit importation - drug smuggling
- Survey research primary way we learn about illicit recreational use
- As of 2008:

- 117 million lifetime users
- 35.5 million users in past year
- 20 million users in past 30 days

### Three Eras of Drug Use

- The Natural Era
- The Transformative Era
- The Synthetic Era

### The Natural Era

- What drugs were used during this era?
- Began when our ancestors ingested plants that contain psychoactive ingredients
- In ancient times, drug use occurred in the context of either a religious and ceremonial context, or as medicine.
- Included the distillation of alcoholic beverages

### The Transformative Era

- What drugs were used during this era?
- Began at the dawning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with discoveries and innovations that produced *new* substances that are more potent than natural plant products
- 1803: morphine extracted from opium
- 1831: codeine was synthesized from opium
- 1874: diacetylmorphine (heroin) synthesized from coca leaves

### The Synthetic Era

- What drugs were used during this era?
- Began at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- Scientists began to create drugs entirely from chemicals not found in nature
- 1903: the first barbiturate, Barbitol synthesized
- 1920s: amphetamines synthesized
- Spawned a pharmacological revolution that included recreational use

### Sociological Changes

- Availability to the young of a disposable income
  - Recreational drug use rare for adolescents in tribal, agrarian, and early industrial societies
- Globalization and technology has revolutionized the drug trade.

### Drug Use in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

- Tobacco and alcohol remain #1 and #2 in terms of death and disease, killing more than ½ a million people in the U.S. annually.
- Illicit drugs, or the illicit use of prescription drugs, are associated with far fewer annually.