

Using or Abusing?

An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Psychoactive Drugs

MARLENE DOBKIN DE RIOS, PH.D.* & DAVID E. SMITH, M.D.**

This paper is based on De Rios' study (1973) of a dozen societies where plant psychedelic use is part of the social tradition, and on Smith's sociological and medical observations of drug-using American sub-cultures (1975). In American society, use of socially-defined illicit substances, when discovered, calls into operation an apparatus of detoxification, intervention and rehabilitation. However, in traditional societies of the world, the anthropological record indicates that ritual use of psychoactive plants is rarely viewed as abuse. The anthropological record clearly shows that throughout time, man has intoxicated himself with a vast number of plant species that alter normal waking consciousness. In fact, some studies argue that the desire for such alteration of human consciousness is a basic human psychological characteristic (Weil, 1973; Bourguignon, 1973). In agreement with Blum (1959), we find that native drug use does not threaten the integrity of traditional cultures.

Throughout human history, psychoactive substances have belonged to special realms constrained with taboos, rituals and proscription. Individuals about to embark upon a drug journey were properly prepared. The

sacralization of psychoactive plants in traditional society attests to the maturity and experience of non-Western man in treating substances not amenable to secular use. The attitude of traditional man offers a fascinating contrast to the public hysteria over the last decade regarding the so-called drug abuse question in American society. Western man tends to view psychoactive drug use with alarm. Recent cytogenetic studies of peyote use remove some of the specter of physiological damage caused by hallucinogens (Dorrance, Janiger, and Teplitz, 1975). While many psychological, physiological and social problems are connected with psychoactive drug use in contemporary American society, we find that in traditional societies, ritualization of drug use averts many of the risks encountered by drug users in the West.

Since mid-century, with increasing use of psychoactive substances by large segments of the youth culture, many American researchers have turned to questions of drug use and abuse. Mostly, following writers like Jaffe (1975), these researchers have defined drug abuse in terms of normative social values, where some drugs are legally accessible to the public and others are not. Except for the occasional dissenting voice (Fort, 1973), researchers have rarely suggested that a drug's healthful or harmful effects should determine whether it is made legally available to the public. In recent years, scholars have been examining psychoactive drug use in non-Western societies to see indeed what lessons might be learned. They have discovered that regardless of the legal strictures of a given society, social norms are not necessarily based on logical, rational premises. A drug may be illegal, but this does not necessarily mean its

*Department of Anthropology, California State University, Fullerton.

**Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic, 1696 Haight Street, San Francisco, California 94117.

Dr. de Rios would like to acknowledge support from the National Institute of Mental Health, Post-Doctoral Fellowship #1-F32 MH05062, for the period of September 1, 1975, to August 31, 1976. Opinions expressed in this paper reflect those of the authors.

effects are harmful. What are the true factors that determine the effects a psychoactive drug will have on the user?

Antecedent biological, psychological and cultural variables strongly influence the subjective effects of psychoactive drugs. These variables must be considered before we can predict the effect that use of a drug will have on members of a given society. The major finding of this report underlines a notion first explored by Wallace in 1959: that cultural variables, such as belief systems, values, attitudes, and expectations, structure one of the most subjective experiences available to man — the drug experience.

De Rios' 1973 report drew upon excellent drug libraries in California. Most of the dozen societies she selected had been studied prior to European influences upon them. In some of the societies, however, drug cults arose in response to acculturative pressure. The societies ranged from hunters and gatherers, to pastoralists, to incipient agriculturalists, to ancient civilizations; and included a currently drug-using peasant society in northern Peru, studied by De Rios in 1967. The 12 societies were: the aborigines of the central Australian desert, the reindeer herders of Siberia, the Huichol Indians of Mexico, the New Guinea highlanders, the Plains Indians of the United States, the Jivaro of the Amazonian rain forest, the Fang of northwestern equatorial Africa, the Aryans of northern India, and the Aztec, Maya, and Inca civilizations, and Mestizos of north coastal Peru.

Blum (1959) states that there is no drug abuse in primitive societies because they do not use drugs for purposes of escape. In non-industrial societies, drug use is a means to socially-approved ends, such as contacting the supernatural to control its forces, or to place oneself at the mercy of forces more powerful than man. Generally, drugs have been used in these societies to strengthen cultural values and goals. In most cases, these societies control drug use by ritual rather than legal means. The individual who uses psychoactive plants does so after serving an apprenticeship or while under the guidance of another, with expectations of particular visions. In contrast to much contemporary American drug use, drugs are rarely taken by the lone individual seeking introspection. The shaman guide uses music (De Rios and Katz, 1975) and odors to evoke specific kinds of visions. Members of traditional societies depend upon the shaman to contact spirit forces by means of his drug experience.

In these societies, drugs are used to support healing, to divine the future, to forecast the course of a disease and to protect the community from its enemies. Plant

hallucinogens are also used to enhance learning. For example, among Amazonian hunters and gatherers such as those described by Cordova-Rios (1971), the plant hallucinogen ayahuasca was used to teach hunters the ways of animals. It is probable that other peoples used such plants to heighten sensory perception and obtain information that was only partially understood or was not accessible through normal perceptual channels. Sometimes drugs are used in societies where beliefs in witchcraft exist, in order to gain power over an enemy. But plant hallucinogens are rarely used to reduce anxiety, avoid personal problems or escape social pressures. Hallucinogenic plants are used to reaffirm a society's mapping of the supernatural permitting individuals to experience beliefs both visually and emotionally.

Societies that value revealed knowledge are likely to attribute supernatural powers to hallucinogenic plants. In these societies that believe first-hand experience is the only true way to knowledge, such plants have been held in awe. When plant drugs were used to reach religious goals, they conveyed to the individual his own personal vision of the supernatural, while reaffirming his society's collective vision of truth and knowledge. In societies where plant hallucinogens were valued, the drug user believed he could see, feel, touch and experience the unknown, filtered through a cultural screen of expected visionary experience. As with Buber's dictum of the I-thou relationship between man and the supernatural (1970), the central commandment of such societies seems to make the secular sacred.

Thus, religious systems determine the way people respond to the magical powers that drugs are believed to confer on users. Shamanistic religion stresses a direct, revelatory experience of the supernatural, heightened by the visionary properties of the hallucinogens. However, as societies become stratified, hierarchies intercede between man and the supernatural. State administrators view such plant potentiators as dangerous to the commonweal. These authorities impose doctrines requiring people to follow approved pathways to the supernatural; as a result, psychoactive plants either fall from popular use or are denied to commoners.

Harner first hypothesized in 1970 that as societies grow more complex, use of and access to plant hallucinogens changes. The data show quite clearly that with growing status differentiation and elite formation, use of plant hallucinogens tends to be arrogated by elite segments of society which usurp the drug by means of their sumptuary laws. The Inca response to coca (a CNS stimulant, but one probably mixed with other plant hallucinogens in pre-Columbian times) illustrates this

theme nicely. About 150 years prior to the Spanish intrusion, in the 14th century, Inca nobility began to promulgate myths concerning the origin of coca, a native plant drug grown since antiquity in the region. Such myths justified usurpation of the coca plant from common usage. Access to the plant became part of a reward system controlled by the evolving Inca state administration. The Maya restricted psychoactive flora and fauna use in a similar manner. The Aztec used stringent measures to control another psychoactive substance, alcohol. Among the Aztec and Maya, usurpation of drugs by the elite explains the sudden loss of drug knowledge when the Spaniards arrived and persecuted priestly castes.

As societies became more hierarchically structured, drug use also changed. In traditional societies, drugs tend to be shared communally, while in stratified societies, drugs are withheld from widespread use. Since traditional societies believed drugs bestowed magical power to bewitch and kill, restrictions on drug use helped maintain the elite in power. A peasant shaman, armed with drug plants, could be a threat to elite control. As stressed by Wasson and Wasson (1957), it may be that in the history of Western civilization, ancient oracular use of hallucinogens in Greece and Rome disappeared because of this threat to state power.

RITUALISTIC DRUG USE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

Some portion of contemporary American use of psychoactive drugs has elements in common with ritual drug use in traditional societies, with regard to ritualization of use. Smith (1975) suggests the following categories of contemporary American drug use: experimental, recreational, ritual, compulsive, and medicinal. (The last category includes those individuals who self-medicate to feel better emotionally or use drugs to stay awake, be more alert, etc.) Similarly, Unwin (1971) lists a number of reasons why American youths take drugs: religious searches, curiosity, need to conform to peer group values, the dare factor, rebellion against authority, search for identity or for mystical experience, and escape from intolerable life circumstances. Although we plan to describe ritual drug use among American youth in a forthcoming paper, one detail is worth reporting here. As noted in traditional societies, music was an integral part of drug-taking sessions, to evoke visions. In the American counterculture, rock music often guides the drug user on his psychedelic journey.

Ritualistic drug use spread rapidly in the counterculture following popularization of Timothy Leary's famous slogan, "turn on, tune in and drop out." The

dominant culture reacted strongly to this use of drugs, labeling it destructive. However, members of the counterculture use drugs ritualistically to achieve many of the same goals that members of traditional societies sought to achieve through drug use. These goals include expansion of cosmic consciousness, enhancement of religious feeling, and improved self-understanding. In traditional societies, ritualized drug use often facilitated achievement of group goals, contributed to social cohesion, reaffirmed belief systems, and performed adaptive functions for the group. We suggest that psychoactive drug use serves the same functions in the counterculture, and that contemporary ritualistic drug use can be beneficial to individual drug users and to the drug-taking groups to which they belong.

For some young people, drug-taking gives coherence to life's experiences. Jaffe and Claude (1964) stress that in certain youth subcultures illicit drug use has been transformed from a deviant act to a major symbol of the differences between the generations. We agree with Rappaport (1971), that ritual is an information exchange device which communicates across the boundaries of local social groups. Eventually, this communication helps in the planning of social strategies.

We propose a parallel between restrictions on drug use adopted by state-level traditional cultures and contemporary American restrictions on drug use. In traditional cultures, elite groups reserved psychoactive drugs for their own use, and passed laws forbidding the common people from using these drugs. In American society, although drugs such as marijuana and cocaine are forbidden to all, enforcement of the drug laws is unequal. Respectable, middle class individuals are able to use illicit drugs in the safety of their suburban homes with little chance of discovery. Counterculture adherents who dress in a distinctive manner and use drugs in vans, in public parks or on the street are more visible to the police and more likely to be the object of surveillance and searches for contraband. Thus, young people and members of the counterculture run a higher risk of discovery, arrest and incarceration for illicit drug use than do members of the dominant culture.

CONCLUSION

We reject definitions of drug abuse that are based on arbitrary social norms. We define drug abuse as use of a psychoactive substance in a fashion that seriously interferes with the user's economic, physical or social functioning. By this definition, ritual drug use is not abuse. We suggest the major danger of certain patterns of ritualistic drug use in American society is that the user may be arrested for violating laws based on social norms

that are not clearly related to health considerations. We suggest that additional research be done on ritualistic drug use among American youth to explore its value to the individuals and groups involved. Given the rapid rate of social change now occurring in this country (Toffler, 1970) we hope that American society will see the value certain patterns of ritualistic drug use, and come to agree with our definition of drug abuse.

REFERENCES

- Blum, Richard and Associates. *Drugs and Society*. Volume I. Stanford, California: Jossey-Bass, 1959.
- Bourguignon, Erika. *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness and Social Change*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1973.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner & Sons, 1970.
- Cordova-Rios, Manuel. *The Wizard of the Upper Amazon*. New York: Atheneum, 1971.
- Dobkin de Rios, Marlene. The non-western use of hallucinogenic agents. *Drug Use in America: Problem in Perspective*. Second Report of the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse, Appendix, Volume I:1179-1235, Washington, 1973. See also revised edition, *The Wilderness of Mind: Sacred Plants in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Beverly Hills, Sage Cross-Cultural Publications in the Social Sciences, (in press).
- Dobkin de Rios, Marlene, and Katz, Fred. Some relationships between music and hallucinogenic ritual: the "jungle gym" in consciousness. *Ethos*, 3(1):64-76, 1975.
- Dorrance, David; Janiger, Oscar; and Teplitz, Raymond, L. Effects of peyote on human chromosomes. Cytogenetic study of the Huichol Indians of northern Mexico. *JAMA*, 234:299-302, 1975.
- Fort, Joel. *Alcohol, Our Biggest Drug Problem*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1973.
- Harner, Michael J. Personal communication, 1970.
- Jaffe, Jerome H. Drug addiction and drug abuse. In: Goodman, Louis S., and Gilman, Alfred, eds. *Pharmacological Basis of Therapeutics*, 5th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1975, pp. 284-324.
- Jaffe, Dennis T., and Claude, Ted, eds. *Worlds Apart: Young People in Drug Programs*. New York: Vintage Books, 1964.
- Rappaport, R.A. Ritual, sanctity and cybernetics. *American Anthropologist*, 73:59-71, 1971.
- Smith, David E. Special treatment and service needs of youthful drug abusers. *Final Report: A Survey of New Techniques for the Treatment of Drug Abusers*. Volume II, Chapter X, Washington: Metcor, 1975.
- Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. New York: Random House, 1970.
- Unwin, J.R. Contemporary misuse of psychoactive drugs by youth. In: Arieti, S., ed; *World Biennial of Psychiatry*. (Volume I) New York: Basic Books, 1971, pp. 426-459.
- Wallace, A.F.C. Cultural determinants of response to hallucinatory experience. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1:58-69, 1959.
- Wasson, Gordon R., and Wasson, Valentina. *Russia, Mushrooms and History*. New York: Atheneum, 1957.
- Weil, Andrew. *The Natural Mind: Another Way of Looking at Drugs and the Higher Consciousness*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1973.