

A study of drug abuse in a group of South African university students

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Summary

Seventeen informal interviews and 1597 questionnaire responses provided an investigation of drug abuse in a group of South African students. Legal problems in South Africa make research of drug abuse (and indeed many other areas of social relations), particularly interviewing, extremely hazardous and therefore uncommon. Not surprisingly, in view of this, the interviews revealed findings inconsistent with the questionnaire data in many areas. Indeed, the informal technique demonstrated the need for more personal research in this field rather than grouped data questionnaires, the latter being seemingly responsible for the myth of the stereotypic drug taker.

S. Afr. med. J., 61, 666 (1982).

Dr. 18

Subjects and methods

Questionnaires dealing with drug-taking practices and variables such as personality factors, crime, family dissonance and religiosity were sent to a random sample of 1 in every 3 students registered at an English-language university in 1978. A total number of 1597 students (anonymous) responded to the study after 'universal reminders' had been posted.

In order to provide more in-depth perceptions and to supplement (or contradict) the information obtained from the questionnaire data, 17 informal interviews were also conducted. Because of the dangers involved if total anonymity was to be guaranteed, no sampling frame could be used in order to obtain subjects and hence a non-random snowballing sampling procedure was employed.

Initially, a likely looking candidate — in terms of dress, length of hair and one conspicuous earring — was approached in the student refectory. Confidence was established first and then this particular student was interviewed personally in order to further establish my *bona fides*. At no stage, obviously, was a request made for the name of the student. Finally the respondent was asked to send along friends also deeply involved in the drug culture because at this stage confidence and guarantees of anonymity had been established. Seventeen students called on me in my office, each being assigned a numeral for identification and then interviewed at length.

Results

Of those who completed the questionnaire, 25,1% indicated that

they had smoked dagga (cannabis) and 7,2% that they had taken dagga in other forms; 3,5% had taken amphetamines, 3,26% cough mixtures and 2,82% methaqualone (Mandrax); 2,6% had sniffed glue, 1,3% had used LSD and 1,2% barbiturates. Less

TABLE I. COMPARISON OF REPORTED INCIDENCE OF DRUG ABUSE IN THIS SURVEY AND OTHER STUDIES

Drug category	Study	Incidence (%)	Year
Dagga	Richard Goldstein; survey across USA	14,3	1968
Dagga	Wesleyan, Princeton and Yale studies	15-20	1966-1967
Dagga	Florida state-wide high schools survey	13	1971
Dagga	Durham University study, UK	18	1971
Dagga	Australian survey (Herr and Morley ¹)	18	1972
Dagga	Five USA colleges (Blum ²)	10 (lowest) 33 (highest)	1974
Dagga	Pretoria University estimation*	0,22	1973
Dagga	Rhodes University study†	26,6	1978
Dagga	University of the Witwatersrand ¹	22,1	1974
Dagga	Present survey	25,1	1978
LSD	Robert Kennedy estimate for 50 universities	1	1971
LSD	Wesleyan, Princeton and Yale studies	1-3	1966-1967
LSD	US West Coast University survey	2,2	1967
LSD	Australian survey ¹	1,7	1972
LSD	Five USA colleges ²	2 (lowest) 9 (highest)	1974
LSD	University of the Witwatersrand ¹	2,3	1972
LSD	Present survey	1,3	1978
Amphetamines	Durham University study, UK	12	1971
Amphetamines	Australian survey ¹	11	1972
Amphetamines	Five USA colleges ²	11 (lowest) 32 (highest)	1974
Amphetamines	University of the Witwatersrand ¹	4,1	1972
Amphetamines	Present survey	3,5	1978

*Sunday Express, 13 May 1973 — 'Drug-taking on Pretoria campus minimal — study'.
†Rand Daily Mail, 22 July 1978 — 'Rhodes grass is greener'.

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Date received: 20 August 1981.

than 1% of the total student population had experimented with agents in the remaining drug categories. These figures compare favourably with those obtained from surveys conducted overseas and locally as Table I indicates.

However, what must not be lost sight of with regard to the incidence of drug abuse is that the majority of respondents who indicated that they had experimented with specific drugs on at least one occasion have since quit using them either after using them a little (more often the case) or after ingesting them regularly.

Hypotheses related to drug abuse

Hypotheses relating specific variables (religiosity, family dissonance, criminality and specific personality factors) to drug use were also tested via the questionnaire. The variables selected for the hypotheses are typical and were derived from consultation of literature in this area:

1. Family dissonance — Blum *et al.*,² Chein *et al.*,³ Chein,⁴ Laurie⁵ and Light.⁶

2. Criminality — Louri,⁷ Clinard,⁸ Bensusan,^{9,10} Skousen,¹¹ Blum *et al.*¹² and Levin *et al.*¹³

3. Religiosity — Blum *et al.*,² Clausen,¹⁴ Clarke and Levine,¹⁵ and the Canadian Government commission of inquiry into the non-medical use of drugs (1970).

4. Specific 'defects' of personality — Birdwood,¹⁶ Kalant and Kalant,¹⁷ Willis,¹⁸ Galli¹⁹ and Theron.²⁰

Family dissonance was not related to drug use on the basis of the questionnaire, but the interviews demonstrated that rejection of this hypothesis should not be categorical, particularly if individual variations are taken into account.

The hypothesis relating tendencies towards low infringement to drug use, on the other hand, was sustained on all levels tested in the questionnaire, viz. whether the individual respondent and his or her friends had been in trouble with the law ($\chi^2 = 28,39$ with 2 df and $\chi^2 = 48,70$ with 2 df); the buying or drinking of alcohol while under age ($\chi^2 = 84,213$; 2 df); driving of a motor vehicle without a licence ($\chi^2 = 13,852$; 2 df); the removal of items of small ($\chi^2 = 27,17$; 4 df), medium ($\chi^2 = 25,48$; 4 df) and large value (χ^2 invalid, > 20% of all cell frequencies < 5); and the purposeful damage of public or private property ($\chi^2 = 54,276$; 4 df). (Questions in these areas stipulated a time limitation to the 'last 5 years or so'.) Once again, however, the interviews showed that retention of this hypothesis should not be automatic.

The hypothesis relating religiosity and the abuse of drugs was also sustained on all levels of investigation contained in the questionnaire. A self-rating scale was used to test degrees of religiosity ($\chi^2 = 92,01$; 12 df); whether respondents prayed privately or not ($\chi^2 = 34,643$; 2 df); whether they thought the idea of God was unnecessary in our enlightened age ($\chi^2 = 51,4$; 8 df); whether or not children should be brought up religiously ($\chi^2 = 84,31$; 2 df); and degrees of reality of God to respondents ($\chi^2 = 72,1$; 2 df). The interviews too, it seems, validated this finding on the whole. It was discovered, therefore, that less religious students were more inclined to drug abuse.

Lastly, the hypothesis relating drug abuse to the family ($\chi^2 = 43,82$; 4 df) and the psychiatric history of the respondent ($\chi^2 = 14,49$; 2 df) could be sustained on the basis of the questionnaire data but not the interviews, although these test factors may not be wholly adequate as indicators of personality problems. Finally, the structured questionnaire method demonstrated that there was no relationship between drug use and whether respondents were lonely in Johannesburg, or in terms of friendship satisfaction. Generally, there was no relationship between drug use and friendship satisfaction in interview respondents either.

Questionnaires

Certain factors investigated were intrinsic to the two methods

employed. Questionnaire data demonstrated the relationships between specific demographic variables and drug use as follows:

Sex. Male drug users outnumbered their female counterparts.

Age. Students aged between 19 and 26 years were prone to drug use. The 17-18-year age group and students older than 26 years had lower incidences of drug abuse.

Home language. English-speaking students made the greatest non-medical use of drugs. Second were respondents who indicated that their home language was other than English or Afrikaans and last were the Afrikaans-speaking students.

Religion. Jewish students used the greatest amount of drugs. They were followed by 'other religions', atheists/agnostics, Catholics and Protestants, in that order. This compares favourably with Hochman's assertions.²¹

Year of study. Fifth-year students used the greatest amount of drugs, followed by 3rd-year students, postgraduate students, 2nd-, 4th-, 1st- and 6th-year students, in that order.

Place of residence (urban/rural). No relationship was ascertained between this factor and drug abuse.

Other areas of exploration were multiple drug use and the abuse of drugs by members of the family other than the respondent. Very few students had used drugs besides dagga. As regards drug use by members of the family other than the students, relationships were ascertained in respect of dagga and of other drugs.

Finally, a model of multiple determination based upon Goodman's analysis²² demonstrated the order of influential strengths of the most highly significant variables related to drug abuse as: (i) illegal activities ($\beta = 4,29$); (ii) religiosity ($\beta = 3,24$); (iii) religious affiliation ($\beta = 3,20$); and (iv) age ($\beta = 2,56$). Thus Goodman's procedure demonstrated that the most important factor related to drug abuse was involvement in the specific illegal activities detailed earlier. The second most important related variable was degree of religiosity and the third was religious affiliation. Last was age, with students aged 19 - 26 years being more inclined to drug use.

Interviews

There were also some factors intrinsic to the interviews. The most striking feature that emerged from this second method of data collection was the marked individuality of each interview. However, certain 'patterns' did emerge, although there were always qualifications and exceptions. Generally the interviewees were irreligious and the peer group subculture appeared to be of very great importance in relation to drug abuse, drugs being most often ingested in the company of friends for purposes of sociability. However, a few students often used drugs on their own; hence each case of drug-taking needs to be analysed separately unless the investigator wishes to ignore the exceptions and qualifications in what may be a naïve quest for overview patterns.

The reasons for taking drugs were many and varied, although a desire for sociability and enhanced sensory perception seemed to appear as reasons up to a point. Again there were exceptions; for example, a few students smoked dagga mainly to relax, while others used drugs for hallucinatory effects. Likewise the effects of the different drugs varied; for example, some students hallucinated on LSD 'trips' while others did not. The only possible pattern to emerge was that many interviewees reported a heightened sensory awareness as one of the effects produced subsequent to the smoking of dagga.

Discussion

Legal obstacles to research into drug abuse in South Africa

Perhaps the most important implication for future research into drug abuse evolves around Section 13 of Act No. 14 of

1971.²³ For, while the Act provides for the detention of persons who have knowledge of 'illegal drug peddling' (dealing), the term is so widely defined as to possibly encompass information about someone who has purchased illicit drugs; it could theoretically mean that if any of the research subjects have ever purchased drugs, it is possible that the sociological investigator may be detained until such time as the public prosecutor is satisfied either that the researcher is ignorant, or is no longer withholding information about dealers. The consequences are twofold:

Firstly, research investigators fear to conduct research into drug abuse because of their subjects' possible detention under the Act.

Secondly, students fear to present themselves for interviews. Even though these may be strictly anonymous as in this study, there is nothing to prevent the investigator, on termination of the interview, from calling in representatives of the law who are 'just around the corner' (a particularly frightening possibility). I do not mean to cast discredit upon the integrity of sociologists but simply to point out a thought that was uppermost in the minds of some students who came for interviews. Hence, understandably, even when a 'snowballing' sampling technique is employed respondents simply do not come forward in large numbers. This in turn has two consequences: (i) only small samples can be obtained in a non-representative manner, which leaves only one option available for a larger study — the structured technique which produces grouped data and hence does not take cognizance of individual exceptions to the rule and qualifications which are surely of vital importance, particularly in view of the reality of the situation where extremely harsh measures have been enacted and indeed are enforced to large degree in dealing with drug abuse; and (ii) it may be that even those students who use drugs frequently do not feel inclined to return questionnaires because handwriting, religious affiliation, year of study at university, course of registration and other variables make tracing a distinct possibility. Hence statistics, e.g. of incidence, may well not be a fair measure of the true situation.

The myth of the stereotypic drug taker

In view of the difficulties mentioned above, it may well be that insufficient and/or flawed data about drug users leads to the 'mythical' perceptions that people have about them. For example, investigators such as Bensusan⁹ are allowed to assert that 'marijuana users create a danger to the community' (p. 35), without much danger of refutation as there are simply insufficient local data available. Furthermore, Price²⁴ has said that 'any user who repeats his first adventure with dagga is already conditioned to become a social drop-out and a non-contributor to the general scheme of things. He uses dagga, as some use tranquillizers, as a raft to float in the sea of life, instead of learning to swim and to combat the waves. The confirmed smoker is a virtually useless member of society, his mental powers decreased to a low level, living in a state of lethargy, until his next escape into dreamland'. It seems almost needless to point out that many interview respondents were in their final

years of study in their respective degree courses and yet regularly used drugs. The assumption of social unproductivity cannot, therefore, hold across the board for, even as the structured method indicated, students would have dropped out of university if it applied to *all* cases of regular drug use. It is possible that many drug-takers have become socially unproductive but I am merely suggesting that there may be exceptions to the rule and therefore that each individual case needs to be carefully considered on its merits.

I have dealt with the question of criminality already, but it does seem from the interviews that the most 'violent' crime committed against society by the interviewees in this survey is drug-taking. The results obtained from the questionnaire did, admittedly, point to a relation between specific illegal activities and drug abuse, but when it came to stealing items of medium and large value and wilful damage to public or private property, such relationships as were indicated were muted. Furthermore, even among drug-taking students, 'criminals' are very much in the minority.

Finally, contrary to lay belief, it does appear on the whole that family dissonance is not related to drug abuse, at least as far as the results from this survey have indicated.

This article is, in part, based on a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in 1979, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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