



Original Contribution

SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND DRUG DEPENDENCE IN YOUTH

B. Hoffmann*

Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw, Poland

ABSTRACT

Drugs are surrounded by an aura of myths. They are associated with various cults, ideologies, social movements and – unfortunately – pathologies. Humanity has been familiar with psychoactive substances for time immemorial but the functions of these substances have changed over the years. This change has been increasingly dynamic of late. Within the last few decades not only has the model of drug taking changed but also young people's attitudes towards the substances.

Most noteworthy is the evolution that has taken place in the model of drug taking. Nowadays the practice is not limited, as it used to be, to narrow circles of recognisably pathological youngsters but has spread to pupils, students and young men and women who have completed their education and joined the work force, who treat some of the substances as a no less popular element of their daily lives than alcohol. This state of affairs has been brought about to a considerable extent by the changes which are taking place on the drug market itself and by the quantum change in attitudes towards psychoactive substances. The model of functioning of people who take drugs has also changed. Previously, drugs were not taken on an occasional basis but were part of a permanent drug culture. Those who took drugs formed tight-knitted communities. Now, however, young people often take drugs spontaneously, occasionally, almost on the spur of the moment, without being associated with any specific social margin. Youngsters' enormous receptivity to soft drugs and the constant presence of marihuana in their cultural activities has "habituated" them to the problems of drug dependence and led them to feel that they can take drugs and still belong to the drug-free community.

Key words: Psychoactive substances, drug taking, drug culture, young people, cultural changes, drug market.

INTRODUCTION

Psychoactive substances have been known for thousands of years. Despite their frequently changing functions, these substances have been applied in various countries and on various continents. Not only has the model of substance use changed, so has young people's attitude toward psychoactive substances. Particularly noteworthy are the changes which have taken place in Poland in the last few or even dozen or so years. Before I review these processes briefly I would like to outline the history of the presence of drugs in culture over the ages.

One of the first psychoactive substances to be

discovered was the group of hallucinogenic plants which were already known in Palaeolithic times. These included leaves, seeds, fruit and even fungi and were used during religious rituals. Little stone figures dated 1000 – 500 BC and representing so-called divine fungi containing psilocin and psilocybin have been found in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Salvador. The teonanacatl (meaning "godly body") mushrooms played an exceptional role both in the rituals of the Aztecs and the closely related alchemy. Other popular plants, still in use today, were Williams' echinocactus (*Lophophora williamsii*; the Indians call it *peyote*) which contains psychoactive mescaline and so-called magic vine (*Rivea corymbosa*, Ind. *ololiuqui*) whose seeds were used during religious ceremonies and healing practices. In different corner of the globe the Aborigines took advantage of the hallucinogenic

*Correspondence to: Beata Hoffmann, Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw, Poland, E-mail: hoffmann.beata@wp.pl, phone: (+48 22) 407 17 00, mobil: (+48)668 015 660

properties of another plant called *pituri*. From Scandinavia to Kamchatka the fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), a consciousness-altering mushroom, was widely used during religious ceremonies and is said to have been the source of the Vikings' bravery. People have also long been familiar with the hallucinogenic properties of jimson weed (*Datura stramonium*) or deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). These plants played an important part in mediaeval magic and so did another psychoactive plant, black henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*). One of the favourite plants of witches and sorcerers was Mandragora (*Mandragora officinalis*) and it is still popular in some regions. Thanks to its alkaloid content it has hallucinogenic, narcotic, analgesic and somniferous properties and is also thought to be an aphrodisiac. In the late eighteenth century disturbing changes in behaviour were observed in some people who ate cereals. It was later found that the agent responsible for the disturbances of consciousness was ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*), a parasitic fungus which produces dark crescent-shaped spores. In 1938 lysergic acid was synthesised from ergot extract to produce LSD 25 (Lysergic Acid Diethylamide) whose hallucinogenic properties were discovered in 1943. This substance, initially used to treat depression, alcoholism, chronic pain and fatigue, was applied in psychotherapy in Europe and the United States of America. Scrutiny of Australian and Mexican cave paintings has shown that our forebears used natural gases and fumes to achieve altered states of consciousness. Ancient Persian and Greek literature also suggest that the inhabitants of these regions inhaled narcotic substances. These substances were also used in the 19th century for recreational and analgesic purposes.

One of the oldest narcotic plants is Indian hemp. Its psychoactive properties were utilised for centuries in religious ceremonies, medical practice and social life in the broad sense. The action of Middle-Eastern hemp was already described in the 16th century BC. Hemp was used in Assyria (8th century BC), China (4th century BC) and India (2nd century BC). It was also known in ancient Greece and the Moors imported it to Spain and Portugal more than a thousand years ago whence it spread to the rest of Europe. In 1758 Linnaeus described hemp under the name *Cannabis Sativa*. This plant was not widely used as a herbal remedy in

European culture until the eighteenth century when it competed with opium and was also used for medical purposes. Towards the end of the nineteenth century hemp began to be used recreationally, especially in the British colonies. This drug was also known in Africa: the local variety of Cannabis called *kif* was used in Morocco and hashish was used in Egypt. Further south hemp was popular among the Bergdama (Damara), Nama, Ovambo and Tiokwef tribes for whom smoking the weed became a national custom. The Australian aborigines smoked their local variety of marihuana, *bhanga*, at social and religious gatherings. Marihuana was a routine remedy until the nineteenth century. Soon, however, nineteenth-century artists and intellectuals also discovered the plant's narcotic effects. By the end of the nineteenth century hashish was widely used in the British colonies where it was consumed by workers and the poor. Marihuana was legally prohibited in Britain in 1928 but could be still purchased on prescription until 1973. Hemp also became popular in the United States in the early twentieth century thanks to migrant Mexican workers. Initially it was consumed by the poorer classes. Sixteen states de-legalised the sale of marihuana in 1930 and the drug became illegal all over the whole country in 1937. An interesting tradition relating to hemp has survived to this day in Jamaica where ganja smoking and ganja tea drinking is a national custom and a religious sacrament (especially among members of the *rasta* cult). Marihuana also has an important place in India where it is so popular that an organisation called the Indian Hemp Drug Commission, established in the nineteen-nineties, officially announced that the plant was an integral part of Indian life. Although hemp is illegal in most Western-European countries and the United States of America, it is a very popular recreational drug. It is also the source of heated controversy due to its alleged harmlessness.

The most famous psycho-stimulant substance is certainly cocaine. The cocaine bush (*Erythroxylum coca*) grows in the hilly regions of South America. It has been known and used since about 3000 BC and the first country to take advantage of its stimulating properties was Bolivia. The Indians who inhabited this country as well as Peru and Ecuador chewed (1) coca leaves for centuries, mixing them with calcium paste in order to increase the secretion of psychoactive alkaloids. Taken this way, the

cocaine entered the body in amounts insufficient to cause euphoria or hyper-arousal but sufficient enough to alleviate fatigue or quench hunger and thirst and increase endurance (2). In the thirteenth century coca began to be viewed as a gift of the gods, a fact which helped to popularise the weed itself and its magic applications. We know from the source literature that coca leaves found their way to Europe in the sixteenth century. Cocaine, coca's active ingredient, was isolated in 1895 and was very soon applied in medical practice. It gained social approval at the end of the nineteenth century.

Another stimulant, amphetamine, was synthesized in the United States in 1897. Synthetic amines, called amphetamine amines, were obtained in 1910 and seventeen years later amphetamine was used to counteract attacks of bronchial asthma. In 1935 it began to be used to treat narcolepsy. The specific was also administered in cases of motion sickness, Parkinson's disease and migraine. It was used to treat substance dependencies, schizophrenia, impotence and senile apathy. Amphetamine was also used to counteract combat fatigue in frontline soldiers. The substance was legal until the nineteen-fifties and hence rather popular. It was used to boost activity and therefore became extremely popular among drivers, pilots and students. The most potent amphetamine derivatives are MDA, MDMA and MDE. MDMA, the chemical analogue of MDA called *ecstasy*, is the most popular. This drug was synthesised in 1914 (3). Not only its stimulating properties but also its "empathic-prosocial effects" were known from the very start (4).

Opioids, substances obtained from the *Papaver somniferum* poppy, are another group of narcotics. They contain the following narcotic alkaloids: morphine, codeine, papaverin, narcotin, narcein and tebain. The tranquilising and analgesic effects of the poppy have been known for thousands of years. The origins of the plant are unclear but palaeobotanical evidence suggests that the poppy was grown in the Mediterranean basin by the Egyptians, Sumerians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. In the twentieth century remains of poppy seeds and opium extracted from raw poppy heads from Neolithic times have also been found in what are now Switzerland, Italy and Germany. Seed remains have also been discovered in stone-age vessels in south England and Poland. The discovery of poppy heads and poppy seeds

in the Spanish Bat Cave and Western-European clay thuribles suggests that the poppy certainly had ritual functions and that these functions must be traced to the plant's narcotic properties. Arabic traders introduced opium to India in the seventh century and several hundred years later opium was traded in China where the substance's addictive properties were recognised. In England at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was observed that opium consumption leads to increasing "appetite" for the substance. Morphine (*Principium somniferum*) was isolated from raw opium in 1805. It became widely used in medical practice where it is administered to this day.

In the nineteenth century scientific discoveries and technological inventions enabled the isolation of several coca and poppy alkaloids in an exceptionally potent form: cocaine, morphine and heroin. From the mid-nineties on, drugs invaded the world of art where their presence was most prominent in literary art (e.g., Witkacy, Aldous Huxley, Ernst Junger and above all Charles Baudelaire). Baudelaire was one of the first to have the courage to discuss the effects of substances on human beings (5). Later on LSD became very popular with creative circles. Writers, painters, musicians and anybody claiming to be a spiritual prospector participated in sessions (often group sessions) during which this special specific was used. LSD usually led to extraordinary visionary experiences which were important not only in mysticism and religion but also in the plastic creative arts, literature and science. These experiences put the nature of the creative process into new perspective and involved so many areas of artistic endeavour that they began to be known under the umbrella term "psychedelic art" (6). Literary works from the turn of the nineteen-forties and fifties played an important role in the development of countercultural movements, both in the USA and Europe – especially Western Europe.

The socio-economic changes which were taking place in the United States since the early fifties led to the emergence of youth as a separate category, both demographic and social. As the idea of youthfulness evolved, various substances "made an appearance" in the so-called youth lifestyle and gradually became one of its permanent features.

Aldous Huxley published two famous texts in the mid-fifties: the short book *The doors of perception* and the essay *Heaven and hell*, both devoted to altered states of consciousness due to hallucinogenic substance use. Huxley very accurately captured the changes in consciousness and sensory perception which he experienced during his self-experiments with mescaline. The two texts contained a number of fundamental observations concerning the nature of visionary experience and its meaning for the development of culture, religion and many creative processes (7).

LSD was extremely popular in the United States and several European countries in the late fifties. It was so prevalent that it became one of the top-ranking narcotics of the inchoate counterculture (8).

Barbiturates began to be popular in the late fifties. These specifics reduced the negative consequences of amphetamine and were also used when heroin was temporarily unavailable. Benzodiazepines (9) were also popular with youngsters.

The increasing Caribbean immigration to the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century led to the proliferation of hemp among the British population. Marihuana began to appear in London folk and jazz clubs.

By the early sixties psychoactive substance abuse was already becoming a problem in Europe. The substances were widely used not only in the rapidly developing youth culture but also by a variety of age and occupational groups. Many substances which were still legal in the fifties were used to boost activity and endurance, suppress hunger, facilitate learning and help pilots, soldiers, drivers, researchers and housewives get on with their work. Most substances, despite their gradual delegalisation, could still be bought on the black market which increasingly catered for youth. Psycho-stimulants such as amphetamine sulphate (Bennies), dexamphetamine (Dexies), methylphenidate (Rit), methylamphetamine (Meths, Crystal) and durophet (Black Bombers) (10) got into the hands of the inchoate British subcultures.

Psychoactive substances occupied a privileged place in the new American and Western-European countercultural movements in the sixties. The psychedelic revolution which was under way was related to the discovery of ways of expanding consciousness and perceptual potential with the help of substances containing hallucinogenic alkaloids. Some

drugs became important elements of the new model of living and narcotic experiences were reflected in various fields of creative experimentation. LSD was the most popular substance. It enabled people to stretch the limits of time and space. Its main propagator was Timothy Leary, a lecturer of psychology at Harvard University. Leary, one must point out, made a clear distinction between consciousness-expanding substances (11) or recreational drugs derived from plants (12) on the one hand and opioid drugs, for example morphine or heroin, on the other hand. He cautioned people not to avoid the latter (13). Hallucinogenic drugs were an inseparable element of hippie philosophy, music and lifestyle in general. The increasing interest in drugs in many countries led to the strict legal regulation of the possession, distribution and use of hallucinogenic substances but this did not reduce their consumption.

Inhalants began to be popular in the second half of the seventies. At that time they were particularly popular with members of the new *punk* subculture which developed in the Britain and spread to the rest of Europe and the USA. Since then, specific teenage subcultures have been linked to specific substances.

The *rave* subculture emerged in Detroit in the eighties (14). It was closely linked to drugs from the very onset. According to some researchers (15), drugs or – more specifically – chemical psycho-stimulants, greatly contributed to the development of this culture and *ecstasy* was the most popular one.

Changes on the American drug market led to the increased popularity of cocaine. In 1979 cocaine and heroin were the drugs most frequently used by youth.

In the mid-eighties *crack*, a variety of cocaine to be smoked, was a new addition to the American and European hard drug market. *Crack* was very popular with rappers, first in New York and later in California. Rappers frequently sang about it in their melo-declamations.

The history of psychoactive substance use in Poland is also interesting. Drug addiction appeared in this country at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was limited to small groups connected with artistic and medical communities. In the nineteenth-twenties the most popular substances were ether and morphine. Cocaine and peyote were also used but not so frequently.

Three major phases can be isolated in post-war drug addiction in Poland. The first one covers the nineteen-sixties and the first half of the nineteen-seventies. Experimentation with medical substances, mainly sedatives and somniferous substances was typical for this phase. The discovery of a method of domestic production of so-called "compote" (16) in 1976 began the second phase of drug addiction in Poland (17). The production technology of "Polish heroin" was cheap, easy and – above all – could be applied at home. This gave drug addicts a feeling of self-sufficiency and independence. Hippie ideology and – more generally – hippie subculture also began to die down by then. According to Cloward and Ohlin, the new drug addicts formed a specific "withdrawal subculture" (18). Substance use was now a form of escape from reality and a goal unto itself, devoid of any ideological colouring (19). The third phase began in 1990 and was initiated by major changes both on the drug market itself and in the model of substance use. It was greatly affected by the more general cultural transformations which have also shaped present social reality. One of the most important features of our times is certainly pluralism. Postmodernist tolerance and receptiveness to differences and variety are in stark opposition to all attempts to homogenise values and forms of expression. Wide acceptance of ambiguity also gives the impression that anything goes. This peculiar socio-cultural chaos is particularly conspicuous in the attitudes of young people who cannot tell well from evil, valuable from valueless. The picture of Polish high-school pupils at the close of the millennium which emerges from Hanna Świda-Ziemia's research (20) is that of a group of youth unconnected by any shared experiences, value systems or authorities. One of the basic identity-constructing categories was independence (highly prized), manifested in a sense of distinctiveness, freedom to decide how to live and complete freedom of choice. Yet the more youngsters strove to achieve these ideals the more difficult it was for them to build permanent relationships or lasting friendships. One of the major determinants of youth identity was mass culture which often induced teenagers to adopt and consume almost identical ideas and products. Substances occupied and still occupy an important place in young people's lives. They alleviate boredom, are great "organizers" of leisure time, make one feel better and increase productivity (21).

Unfortunately they also give an illusory feeling of unification and are hence an important element of group recreation.

Particularly noteworthy are the changes which have taken place in Poland with respect to the model of substance use. Nowadays, drugs are no longer used only by narrow circles of dysfunctional youth, they are used by young people who are studying or have completed their education and are working, for whom certain substances have become a part of life on par with alcohol. This state of affairs has largely been brought about by the changes on the drug market and the enormous changes in young people's attitudes towards psychoactive substances. In the quoted research by Hanna Świda-Ziemia and my own studies, a distinct polarisation emerged between so-called soft and hard drugs. My respondents went easy on soft drugs (22) due to their allegedly benign consequences and believed their effects to be comparable with the effects of beer. On the other hand they had no tolerance whatever for so-called hard drugs. These opinions were prevalent both among respondents who used drugs and those who did not.

The model of social functioning of drug users has also evolved profoundly. Before, drugs were not used occasionally and their use was linked to permanent affiliation with a close-knit drug community whereas nowadays young people often take drugs spontaneously, incidentally and almost by accident and do not belong to any particular marginal community. My findings so far suggest that most substances are consumed at social gatherings in private homes, student residences, clubs, pubs, or in the open air. The purpose of the gatherings is not to produce or consume drugs together as used to be the case, it is to relax and have fun. The popularity of some substances is strictly related to youth's new lifestyle. This lifestyle permits soft drugs but not hard ones. Now the demarcation line runs not between those who "do" drugs (addicts) and those who "don't do drugs" (non-addicts) but between those who use soft drugs (non-addicts) and those who use hard drugs (addicts) (23).

It is important to remember that soft drugs do not interfere with my respondents' functioning. Many respondents declare that drugs do not interfere with their work or studies. Some psychoactive substances have probably become "an element of the >>natural landscape<<, one of contemporary life's many

proposals addressed to people”(24). Youth’s enormous receptivity to soft drugs and the regular presence of marihuana in their cultural activities has “habituated” them to the problems of drug addiction and given them the illusion that it is possible to take drugs and still belong to the non-drug community (25).

Indian hemp is the most frequently used drug in Europe (26) and its consumption increased particularly dramatically in the nineteen-nineties. What is most disturbing is the lack of awareness of the difference between the marihuana people smoke today and the older variety which was consumed in Poland and other European countries even in the early nineties. The marihuana which is now marketed (called “skun”), is a genetically modified plant. It is several times more potent than the earlier variety and causes many more and more serious adverse effects and health hazards. Worse still, although it could well be classified as a hard drug due to its potency, its origins give the false impression that it is almost harmless and that greatly increases the risk of addiction in young people.

If we analyse the place drugs occupy in contemporary culture we see that substances have become one of its permanent elements. Also, contemporary culture is the culture of pleasure (27), instant gratification and ubiquitous consumption. People want to feel good and pursue this desire anywhere they can in any way they can. Postmodernist reality offers a wide assortment of pleasant experiences but the selection criteria are ambiguous. One way to achieve psychological comfort is to use drugs. The responses of many young respondents suggest that soft drugs, which they associate with freedom and fun, fit perfectly into the world of consumption and offer many “shortcuts”. The time compression which is so typical today corresponds so well with the instant effects which substances ensure. Only hard drugs are viewed as a hazard whereas soft drugs are viewed as a “complement to life” and raise no fears. Hints that soft drugs may be harmful or that adverse effects may be delayed are by no means obvious.

So far antidrug policies have been unsatisfactory. Drug addiction is increasing, not decreasing. Suggestions to legalise psychoactive substances are extremely risky because nobody knows what the consequences may be. Educational antidrug programs are also confronting an extremely difficult

adversary in the way of invasive consumerist ideology (28) with its imperative to always be happy, seek ways to get one’s adrenalin up and covet extreme experiences. Young people are no longer aware that drugs can be addictive and therefore they are at risk of drug dependency at an increasingly younger age.

REFERENCES

1. The leaves are not literally chewed, they are placed in the mouth between the gums and the cheeks.
2. A.L. Spedding, an anthropologist who studied Bolivian coca growers, compares the leaves’ effect to the effect of drinking a cup of strong coffee. It is therefore a mistake to equate the chewing of coca leaves with the use of pure cocaine which is highly addictive.
3. MDMA, that is 3,4-methylenedioxyamfetamine, was first synthesised in 1912 by Merck, the pharmaceutical plant in German Darmstadt, and it was patented in 1914. For more information see: M. Collin (J. Godfrey), *Altered state. The story of ecstasy culture and Acid House*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1998.
4. Cf. Buffum, J. & Moser, Ch. (1986). MDMA and human sexual function. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 18 (4).
5. Baudelaire, Ch. (2005). *Wine and Hashish*. Selection and translation Bohdan Wydźga. Crakow: Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa.
6. This term refers to creative work produced under the influence of drugs (usually LSD) and to the situation where the drug is a source of creative inspiration and affects the final product.
7. More on this in Hofmann A. (1983). *LSD – My problem child*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc.
8. The term „counterculture” was coined by Theodore Roszak, the American cultural historian and theorist, sympathiser and ideologist of the anti-

- establishment movement. He defined the phenomenon in his *Making of a counterculture* (1969) and developed, amended and specified it in *Person Planet* (1979). Counterculture as Roszak understood it was both an expression of rebellion against existing culture and the attempt to develop a new culture which could take the place of the rejected cultural reality. In the entire western civilisation it is a very important step in the two-step development of consciousness. Step one involves the spontaneous, almost instinctual break with technocratic world order, with scientist consciousness. Step two marks the beginning of the desperate yet enthusiastic search for new principles which could substitute the fading authorities of science, productiveness and technological progress.
9. Somniferous and anxiety-relieving substances.
 10. Cf. Robson, P. (1997). *Narkotyki* [Drugs]. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Medycyna Praktyczna.
 11. E.g. LSD, mescaline, psilocybin.
 12. Hemp products.
 13. Hippie ideology was inconsistent with the use of stimulants whereas the sedative and somniferous effects of heroin made it impossible to experience "the world" and get deep into oneself, rendering it unpopular.
 14. According to some sources, for example Reynolds, S., *Energy Flash*, London, Picador, 1998, this phenomenon originated in Dusseldorf in the early seventies. It was there that the Kraftwerk band recorded its pioneering pieces *Autobahn*, *Trans-Europe Express* and *The Man-Machine*, using synthesisers and automatically operated percussion, means which were seminal for the development of techno music, one of the basic elements of *rave* culture.
 15. Collin, M. (J. Godfrey) (1998). *Altered state. The story of Ecstasy culture and Acid House*. London: Serpent's Tail.
 16. The method of production of *compote*, also known as Polish heroin, was discovered by two chemistry students from Gdańsk. The specific contains not only heroin but also many other poppy alkaloids, vinegar and impurities from the chemical substances used in the production technology, such as ammonia, acetone and other solvents.
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 20. Świda-Ziemba, H. (2000). *Obraz świata i bycie w świecie* [Perceiving the world and being in the world]. Warsaw: Institute of Applied Social Studies, University of Warsaw.
 21. At this point I would like to quote the findings of research which I have been conducting for several years into the socio-cultural role of drugs and also the results of work conducted under Professor Hanna Świda-Ziemba's supervision and published in her book *Młodzi w nowym świecie* [Youth in the new world]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005.
 22. Marihuana and hashish (cannabis) are thought to be soft drugs whereas heroin, cocaine and amphetamine are thought to be hard drugs.
 23. Cf. Świda-Ziemba, H. (2005), op. cit., p. 126.
 24. Cf. Świda-Ziemba, H. (2005), op. cit., p. 103.
 25. Cf. Świda-Ziemba, H. (2005), op. cit.
 26. According to the statistics published by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

27. I have adopted the definition of pleasure proposed by A. S. Reber and E. S. Reber in *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (Polish edition published by Scholar, Warsaw 2000, p. 576): pleasure is one of the principal emotional experiences and can be characterized as the desire to repeat the situation which evoked it.
28. For more information on this subject see: Melosik, Z. (2006). *Kryzys męskości w kulturze współczesnej* [The crisis of masculinity in contemporary culture]. Cracow: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls".