Drug Abuse and Behavior

**Question 1:** What is the sociological theory of drug abuse?

**Answer 1:** Sociological theory is concerned with social structures and social behavior, so it examines drug use in its social context. A sociological perspective often views drug use as the product of social conditions and relationships that cause despair, frustration, hopelessness, and general feelings of alienation in the most disadvantaged segments of the population (Biernacki, 1986).

Many sociological studies find that drug use among adolescents is motivated by intermittent feelings of boredom and depression, and like other aspects of adolescence, it is typically abandoned upon reaching adulthood.

**Question 2:** What are some factors that lead to substance abuse?

**Answer 2:** The National Institute on Drug Abuse (Drug Abuse, 1987) outlines factors positively associated with adolescent substance abuse—factors found more frequently in deprived socioeconomic environments:

- Families whose members have a history of alcohol abuse and/or histories of antisocial behavior or criminality
- Inconsistent parental supervision, with reactions that swing from permissiveness to severity
- Parental approval or use of dangerous substances
- Friends who abuse drugs
- Children who fail in school during late elementary years and who show a lack of interest in school during early adolescence
- Children who are alienated and rebellious
- Antisocial behavior during early adolescence, particularly aggressive behavior

**Question 3:** What are the stages of addiction?

**Answer 3:**

*Alcohol*

- **Social drinking:** Alcohol is used to enhance pleasant social situations to relax, entertain, or as part of a religious ritual.
- **Heavy drinking:** Alcohol is used to escape stress. Heavy drinkers violate social conventions about the use of alcohol and suffer negative side effects with respect to family, friends, and employment. They are defensive about their drinking and deny the influence of alcohol on their lives.
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- **Dependant drinking:** the person is now addicted to alcohol and suffers from many consequences—an inability to function normally either socially, intellectually, or physically. He or she is unable to control drinking behavior and becomes obsessed and preoccupied with alcohol.

*Heroin*

- **Experimentation:** The individual experiments with a variety of substances, including alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and so on.
- **Initiation:** The drug abuser is introduced to intravenous use of heroin. First use is often accompanied with vomiting, but the user learns to enjoy subsequent injections.
- **Commitment:** The user is now an addict and takes on the social identity associated with the drug subculture, orienting his or her life towards the maintenance of a heroin habit.
- **Disjunction:** The addict's life is now characterized by crime, arrest, and imprisonment, interspersed with participation in drug treatment programs in response to court direction.
- **Maturation:** At some point, usually when the addict is closer to 40 years old, use becomes sporadic, the user gives up drugs completely as a result of treatment, or simply experiences spontaneous remission—or dies.

*Cocaine*

- **Experimental use:** The individual begins his or her initiation out of curiosity in a social situation in which some friends offer a "taste" of cocaine. It is used typically to enhance feelings. Relationships remain normal and no significant health or financial problems appear.
- **Compulsive use:** The subject begins to buy cocaine and increases the number of friends who are users. Solitary use of cocaine follows. Social disruptions appear, particularly mood swings, as well as health problems due to a lack of proper nutrition and sleep. He or she begins to encounter financial problems that result from a growing cocaine habit.
- **Dysfunctional use:** The abuser is preoccupied with drug use and associates only with cocaine-using friends. Severe disruption of social life follows, including marital violence and divorce. Serious medical pathology appears, with a risk of seizure and toxic psychosis, paranoia, delusions, and hallucinations. Physical appearance also deteriorates, due to lack of nutrition, sleep, and lack of concern for personal hygiene and dress. Compulsion, a loss of control, and an inability to stop despite adverse consequences lead the abuser to seek treatment, often because of pressure from family, friends, and/or employer and/or because of serious legal entanglements.
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**Question 4:** What is **anomie**?

**Answer 4:** Anomie describes an abnormal social condition wherein the cohesion of society is weakened by some crisis, such as an economic depression, that causes each individual to pursue his or her own solitary interests without concern for wider society. This sense of strain is particularly strong among the disadvantaged segments of our population, whose use of drugs is endemic. People respond to anomie in one of four ways: they conform, rebel, innovate, or retreat.

**Question 5:** What is psychoanalytic theory?

**Answer 5:** This theory’s basic proposition continues to be the influence of unconscious phenomena on human behavior. Sigmund Freud posits three types of mental phenomena: (1) conscious, (2) preconscious, and (3) unconscious.

Psychoanalytic theory views drug abuse as a symptom of neuroses that manifest themselves during adolescence. Heroin use typically begins during adolescence, with the drug serving as a means of avoiding psychologically demanding—but healthier—responses to developmental crises, stress, deprivation, and other forms of emotional pain (Khantzian, Mack, & Schatzberg, 1974). Drug use reduces social competence and adaptive behaviors. The therapeutic community responds to a person whose use of drugs is based on an inability to deal with the frustrations of reality.

**Question 6:** What is behaviorism/learning theory?

**Answer 6:** Behaviorists regard the measurement of objective behavior as intrinsic to learning theory, which proceeds on the basis that all forms of behavior are conditioned: the result of learned responses to certain stimuli.

Behavioral psychology recognizes two basic types of processes associated with learning:

- **Classical conditioning** involves the pairing of two stimuli; one elicits a reflex and one is neutral. With repeated pairing of the two stimuli, the previously neutral stimulus becomes a conditioned stimulus and elicits the response in absence of the original eliciting stimulus.

- **Operant conditioning** involves the repeated presentation or removal of a stimulus following a behavior to increase the probability of the behavior. A reinforcer is a stimulus that increases the probability of a behavior. If the probability of a behavior increases following the presentation of some stimulus, then positive reinforcement has occurred. If the probability of a
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behavior increases after the removal of a stimulus, then negative reinforcement has occurred.

References

