The Sociology of Drug Abuse

Sociological studies and theories look at drug abuse in its social context; for instance, in categorizing the stages of alcohol, heroin, and cocaine addiction and suggesting explanations for drug abuse. Anomie theory states that people denied opportunity that is due them in principle suffer from the strain of dissonance and respond by conforming, rebelling, illegally innovating, or retreating. According to the theory, drug abusers choose the last, retreating from conventional social goals and competitive situations. The theory of differential association contends that drug behavior is learned behavior, and the primary learning occurs in a small intimate group. The fact that initial drug use practically always occurs with adolescent friends is evidence for this theory. Social control theory states that the strength of the individual's social bonds predicts normative or deviant behavior, and internal and external restraints determine the strength of the bond. Subcultural theory explains drug use as the result of conforming to the norms of a deviant subculture. Symbolic interactionism contends that it is society's labeling of people and behaviors that determines society's response to those people and behaviors, rather than any attribute inherent to the person or behavior.

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Psychological theories of drug abuse center on the individual and fall into two general categories: psychoanalytic approaches and behaviorist approaches. Psychoanalytic theory's central propositions are that our unconscious exerts a dominant influence on our behaviors, that the unconscious is related to stages in our psychosexual development, and that incomplete resolution of any of the stages finds expression in the entire range of our adult behavior—from career choice to drug abuse. Developing during the psychological stages are the components of the human psyche: the id, primal drives and urges; the ego, reality check and social influence; and the superego, a sense of morality that controls behavior. Incomplete development of the ego or superego can also lead to drug abuse.

Behaviorism, or learning theory, states that all learning is based on operant conditioning—we become conditioned to respond to a stimulus in a certain way. That stimulus reinforces the behavior: It is called positive reinforcement if the probability of the behavior increases with the presentation of the stimulus, and it is called negative reinforcement if the probability of the behavior increases with the removal of the stimulus. A drug's impact on the central nervous system serves as positive reinforcement to continue drug use, and withdrawal symptoms serve as negative reinforcement to continue drug use.