



Review

How psychoactive drugs shape human culture: A multi-disciplinary perspective



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ABSTRACT

Psychoactive drug use occurs in essentially all human societies. A range of disciplines contribute to our understanding of the influence of drugs upon the human world. For example pharmacology and neuroscience analyse biological responses to drugs, sociology examines social influences upon people's decisions to use drugs, and anthropology provides rich accounts of use across a variety of cultural contexts. This article reviews work from multiple disciplines to illustrate that drugs influence aspects of culture from social life to religion, politics to trade, while acting as enablers of cultural change throughout human history. This broad view is valuable at a time when the influence not only of traditional drugs but a growing armoury of novel drugs is felt and debated.

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1. Introduction

Psychoactive drug use occurs in essentially all human societies (Withington, 2014; Thakker, 2013). The use of mind-altering substances has been central to a range of human phenomena from

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shamanic rituals to village pubs to youth counter-cultures (Shortall, 2014). This paper argues that drugs are not merely components of, but rather significant influences upon culture.

It is a remarkable thing, easily overlooked because it is so commonplace, that a very small dose of a chemical can change the way someone thinks and feels. Furthermore, this subjective change can be so compelling that a desire to repeatedly experience it motivates individuals and groups to carry out complex plans that play out over timescales ranging from hours to decades. A range of research disciplines contribute to our understanding of the influence of drugs upon the human world. A major focus has been on why people take drugs and what happens to them when they do (Withington, 2014). While effects upon individuals are a focus of biomedical research (Schultes, 1969), disciplines such as anthropology, evolutionary biology and ethics contribute to an understanding of the broader impact of drugs (Guerra-Doce, 2015). Each of these addresses a critical part of what Withington calls “the cumulative importance of intoxication”; yet none can alone address the complete picture.

1.1. Material and method

This article reviews work from multiple disciplines to shed light on the role of drugs in culture and cultural change. Material was drawn from key journals, books and annual reviews in relevant disciplines, as well as secondary sources that take broader cultural or historical views, with the intention of providing a concise but thorough overview of current thought. This broad view is valuable at a time when societies debate the influence not only of traditional drugs but a growing armoury of novel drugs. The sections following review categories by which we understand drugs and culture, the ubiquity and variety of drug use, the ways in which drug use has influenced culture and behaviour, and syntheses of the role of drug use in the larger human story.

2. Categories and definitions

2.1. Psychoactive drugs

Drugs are substances exogenous to the body which, when ingested, influence biological function by mimicking the action of neurotransmitters upon neurons (Kenakin, 2004). This paper is concerned with psychoactive drugs – those that influence brain functions such as emotion, thought and behaviour.

Sherratt (1995a), introducing the trail-blazing collection of anthropological essays on drugs *Consuming Habits* (Goodman et al., 1995), argued that when analysing drug use it is important first to clarify terminology, since the language of drugs is morally charged and carries legal, ethical and referential meanings that vary in time and space (see also Withington, 2014p. 14). Biological definitions of the term *drug* disregard a substance’s legal status and the purposes for which it is administered. However, legal status and purpose of use are incorporated into the semantics of informal language. The Oxford English Dictionary lists both a scientific definition of “drug” and this vernacular one: “A substance taken for its narcotic or stimulant effects, often illegally.” Hugh-Jones (1995) noted that the concept of drug depends on: “a specific set of rules, norms and conventions concerning the appropriate ways in which these substances are to be distributed and consumed.” Thus non-medical drug use is often called “abuse”, regardless of whether it is problematic, or “recreational” when the purpose for using might well be work-related (cf. Glantz, 2013).

The distinction between medical and recreational use is ancient and cross-cultural (Courtwright 2001; p. 89); however “medical” drugs are frequently abused, and most illegal “drugs of abuse” have at some time or place been used medically—heroin and cannabis are

examples. The concept of *drug* is often tied to the phenomenon of *addiction*; yet not all illegal drugs are addictive (e.g. lysergic acid diethylamide, LSD), some legal drugs *are* addictive (e.g. nicotine), and the harm to society from legal drugs outweighs that caused by illegal drugs (Gowing, 2014). History shows that the legality of a drug tends to be somewhat arbitrary and dynamic: Kushner (2010) notes that it depends more upon “social norms and power relationships” than on pharmacological properties. Medical, religious and recreational use has often been intertwined. Thousands of psychoactive plants have been used in traditional medicines in every area of the globe (and significant research is devoted to exploring their potential to yield new drugs). As drugs cross borders, the conceptual boundaries between legal and illegal, drug and medicine can shift, as demonstrated for example in the widespread prescription of antidepressants by unlicensed doctors in India (Ecks and Basu, 2014).

Newly-engineered pharmaceuticals such as those described elsewhere in this special issue can be difficult to categorize within mainstream schemas of legality, addictiveness and purpose of use. Designer drugs emulate the effects of traditional illegal drugs but are made structurally different in order to avoid prosecution. Authors such as DeGrandpre (2006) have highlighted the “confusion and chaos” of our ethical thinking around drugs: as one drug becomes restricted, pharmacologically equivalent, not-yet-illegal drugs are rapidly devised. There is debate about the ethical status of emerging approaches to mental and physical enhancement using novel and existing psychiatric medicines.

Evolution in legal, political and scientific thought, consumer preference, commercial activity, colonialism and globalization have impacted how societies categorize and understand drugs. For this reason Sherratt (1995a) felt that the term “drug” was too imprecise for academic discourse and preferred the neutral “psychoactive substance”. Terms such as “psychotropic” and “psychopharmaceutical” are evocative and precise but unwieldy. A recent issue of the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* (Lo et al., 2015) discusses the fuzzy boundary between food and drugs, noting that spices, which sit astride this boundary (see Bourgeois et al. 2014), have inspired global commerce comparable to the drug trade. When drugs are eaten with food, their effects on mood can be confused with nutritional benefits (Hagen et al., 2013); thus Jankowiak and Bradburd (1996) used the term “drug foods” to refer to alcohol, coffee and chocolate. Courtwright (2001) acknowledged the complex semantics of the word “drug” but chose to use this word for brevity, intending it to encompass all psychoactive substances whether legal or illegal, natural or artificial, and used for medical or recreational purposes. Using this familiar if loaded word helps to reinforce the common properties that all psychoactive substances possess while undermining artificial boundaries. This paper follows Courtwright in referring to “drugs”, and emphasizing that to fully understand the impact of these substances, one ought not to exclude arbitrarily-defined subsets.

2.2. Drug use

In elaborating influences upon culture, one should also define *drug use* as broadly as possible. In pharmacology, psychology, sociology and some anthropology the focus of drug research is often on compulsive use or addiction: “putative enslavement to a substance or activity” (Weinberg, 2011). Compulsive use can have devastating consequences for users, family, friends and society if the drug, its vehicle or means of administration have negative effects on health, or the cost of regular administration is so high that the user is forced to adopt illegal, unhealthy or stigmatized methods of making money. Though drug use is an ancient phenomenon, serious addiction is a modern one, becoming widespread with the distillation of spirits, the isolation of active ingredients such as

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