Brit. J. Psychiat. (1974), **124**, 208–9

Assessing Drug-taking as a Problem: An English Observation Study

By MARTIN A. PLANT

Very little research has been conducted on drug-takers in the community. Goode (1970) and Reeves (1973) are notable American and British exceptions. Both used non-random methods to collect information from drug-takers in non-clinical settings. In the present study, carried out in Cheltenham, I used participant observation as a means of approaching drug-takers in their 'natural' settings. I employed an anthropological technique called 'snowballing'. This involved introducing myself to a few drug-takers. These individuals, when satisfied about my identity and intentions, introduced me to their drug-taking friends, who in turn introduced me to the network of other drug-takers whom they knew. During the period August 1970–October 1972, I was able, informally, to observe the life-styles and drug-taking behaviour of a number of drug-taking groups within the community. In addition, I collected statistical information about the biographical characteristics of 200 individuals I encountered. A standardized interview schedule was used which investigated family backgrounds, employment, education, social relationships, delinquency, drug histories, living conditions, ideology and sexual behaviour.

All of those interviewed had used cannabis at least six times during my fieldwork. It was assumed that this criterion would exclude those who were merely experimenting and concentrate upon people with greater involvement.

Social Characteristics

This was not a randomly selected sample, representative of all the drug-takers in the community. The methodology possibly produced a bias towards those individuals with a higher level of drugtaking experience.

Sex: 153 respondents, 76·5 per cent of the sample, were males. This was consistent with my personal observations, and with Goode's findings in relation to cannabis smokers in New York.

Socio-economic status: American evidence (Chein *et al.*, 1964) suggests that narcotics dependence is linked with low socio-economic status. There is less British evidence to support this conclusion. Several British studies (Kosviner *et al.*, 1968; Binnie and Murdock, 1969; and Wiener, 1970) suggest that drug-takers are not necessarily from low socio-economic status groups. Of my respondents, 120, 60 per cent of those interviewed, came from non-manual backgrounds. The fact that most of the sample were middle-class rather than working-class indicates a departure from traditional theories of social deviance.

Age: The ages of the sample ranged from 15 to 41. 120 individuals, 60 per cent were aged between 19 and 22. This finding is consistent with the studies of Goode in America and Reeves in Southern Hampshire.

The sub-groups: For the purposes of general discussion, three important categories of respondents are distinguished. There was considerable overlap between these sub-groups, as well as considerable variation within them. Nevertheless, they are useful configurations:

(1) *Students:* 73 respondents; 36·5 per cent were full-time students at institutions of higher or further education.

(2) *Middle-class bohemians:* 40 respondents; 20·0 per cent were non-manual workers, or were still at school.

(3) *Low-status unemployed or manual workers:* 87 respondents; 43·5 per cent were either unemployed or had manual jobs.

First drug experience: 148 individuals, 74·0 per cent of those interviewed, reported that they had started to use drugs out of curiosity. An additional 32 individuals, 16·0 per cent, stated that they had first used drugs because they had been persuaded to do so by friends. Altogether, 187 respondents, 93·5 per cent, had first been introduced to drug-taking by friends or relatives. Only ten individuals, 5·0 per cent of the sample, stated that they had first been introduced to drug-taking by people whom they did not know well. It appeared that peer group pressure, and the example and influence of well-known and respected friends, were important factors in leading to the adoption of drug-taking behaviour.

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.124.2.208 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Patterns of drug taking

Drugs ever taken

Drugs used	No.	%
Cannabis	200	100·0
Hallucinogens	155	77·5
Amphetamines	108	54·0
Hypnotics	93	46·5
Miscellaneous medical (w.o. prescription)	62	31·0
Raw opiates	33	16·5
Manufactured opiates	30	15·0
Cocaine	30	15·0
Miscellaneous non-medical ..	22	11·0

Drugs used: 172 individuals, 86·0 per cent, had used drugs other than cannabis. 31 individuals, 15·5 per cent, had experience of injected drugs. All but 3 of these had either discontinued injecting, or did so only very rarely. The evidence indicated that after becoming a drug-taker a person was likely to experiment with a range of drugs, possibly to demonstrate commitment to the drug 'scene'. After this experimental phase, individuals generally reverted to fewer, or a single, type of preferred drug, usually to cannabis, or discontinued drug-taking altogether. The injection of drugs was generally disapproved of by the students and middle-class bohemians, and only one respondent in these sub-groups had ever injected drugs. Those with the widest range of drug-taking experience were amongst the low-status unemployed or manual workers. This sub-group had little status in the workaday world, and had the most catholic tastes in drug use. Included were several heavy drinkers and cigarette smokers. Most of those interviewed clearly rejected the suggestion that their drug use had been a response to stress or sickness, or that it had adversely affected them. Many stressed that 'becoming a drug-taker' was a commitment to a general outlook and lifestyle, which they saw as positive and valuable. Only three respondents were regularly injecting opiates (obtained illegally), and the great majority of those interviewed were not physically dependent upon drugs. Only 25 individuals, 12·5 per cent, had ever consulted a doctor in connection with their drug-taking; of these 6 individuals had been treated for drug dependence. Very few of the sample reported ever having suffered either physical or material harm as a consequence of their drug use. The clear consensus amongst those observed and interviewed was that their drug experience had been controlled and enjoyable.

Social problems: There were as many differences between individual drug-takers as there may be between drug-takers and non-drug-takers. The students and middle-class bohemians did not appear to be problematic in terms of the factors examined, such as delinquency, unemployment, living conditions, intactness of natural family and attempted suicide. Amongst the low-status unemployed and manual workers, there was a high proportion of individuals with disturbed biographies or coming from economically underprivileged backgrounds. The evidence indicated that the commonly used distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' drugs is oversimple. Many individuals had experimented with the so-called 'hard' drugs without becoming dependent upon them. Others were incessant users of drugs normally regarded as 'soft'. In conclusion, it is suggested that a purely medical model of drug-taking, while valuable in relation to the condition of physical drug dependence, is inapplicable to most drug-takers in the community. A common distinction is made between social drinking and alcoholism. Perhaps it would be useful to make a similar distinction between drug-taking and drug abuse.

References

Binnie, L., and Murdock, G. (1969). *The Attitudes to Drugs and Drugtakers of Students at the University and Colleges of Higher Education in an English Midland City.* University of Leicester: Vaughan Press.

Chein, I., Gerard, D. L., Lee, R. S., and Rosenfeld, T. (1964). *Narcotics, Delinquency and Social Policy: The Road to H.* New York: Basic Books.

Goode, Erich (1970). *The Marijuana Smokers.* New York: Basic Books.

Kosviner, A., Mitcheson, M. C., Ogborne, A., Zacune, J., Myers, K., Stimson, G. V., and Edwards, G. (1968). 'Heroin use in a provincial town.' *Lancet, i,* 1189–92.

Reeves, Charles E. (1973). 'Sociological aspects of drug taking in Southern Hampshire', paper presented at 2nd International Conference on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Liverpool, April 1973.

Wiener, R. S. P. (1970). *Drugs and Schoolchildren.* London: Longman.

Martin A. Plant, M.A., *Department of Social Administration and Social Work, University of Bristol, Cotham Villa, Victoria Walk, Cotham, Bristol 6*

(*Received 24 April 1973*)

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.124.2.208 Published online by Cambridge University Press