Sociological Theories of Substance Abuse

Psychology 470
Introduction to Chemical Addictions
Steven E. Meier, Ph.D.

Listen to the audio lecture while viewing these slides

Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Background

• Are different from other models
• Psychology and Biology
  • Focus is on the individual
• Sociology
  • Focus is on the behavior and impact of groups

Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Many Models

• Sociocultural theories
• Supracultural theories
• Subcultural theories
• Labeling theories

Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Sociocultural theories

• Have been based on observations of similarities or differences between groups or subgroups
• Generally contend that environmental factors cause differences in use rates for different compounds.
  • Socially disorganized communities have less control and shared values than more organized communities
  • Have fewer social controls
  • Have more use of compounds
  • Inner city drug use is more rampant than suburbs.

Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Goode

• Social context determines
  • drug definitions,
  • drug effects,
  • drug-related behavior
  • drug experiences
• Contends these aspects must be considered when discussing drug use

Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Example – Heroin and Morphine

• Are both narcotics and used for pain relief
• Heroin (in U.S.)
  • Is considered dangerous
  • Has no value
• Morphine
  • Is considered a medicine
Definitions shape the social context

- When morphine is used on the street, the feelings and effects are different than when used in a hospital
- Other drugs have similar impacts
  - Peyote on the street has different effects than when used in a religious ceremony

The social context is important

- Drug has many effects on the person
- User only pays attention to some aspects
- The user interprets the effects based on some sociological context
  - Interprets the effects
- So, use, abuse, and addiction are all based and influenced by the sociocultural system in which one resides.
  - E.g., U.S. society says taking hallucinogens such as LSD or smoking marijuana is bad but social drug use such as smoking or using alcohol is ok
  - Netherlands, marijuana and other drugs are ok.

Conclusions

- The culture where one resides is extremely important in deciding what are appropriate and inappropriate drugs.
- Is backed up by the literature in both psychology and sociology

Supracultural Models

Culture 1

- Cultures that ________
  - Produce guilt
  - Suppress aggression
  - Suppresses sexual tension
  - Condones alcohol use to relieve tension

Will have high rates of alcoholism
### Societal Attitudes are Important

- Different attitudes about alcohol by a society will impact alcohol use
- Attitude types
  1. Abstinence
  2. Ritual use associated with ceremonies
  3. Drinking in social settings
  4. Drinking for personal reasons (utilitarian drinking)

Societies that focus on 1, 2, & 3 tend to have lower rates of alcohol problems
Societies which focus on number 4 and have a lot of social tension will have higher rates of alcohol problems

### Stress / Strain

- If a society has ways to release tension or providing substitutes to achieve satisfaction, they will have fewer alcohol problems
- If there is a strong emphasis on social upward mobility and people are blocked from achieving it (lack of education, geographic area, etc.), higher rates of alcohol problems would occur

### E.g. Rural Areas

- Logging or mining communities
- Have jobs but some upward mobility
- Communities which have activities have fewer problems
- Communities with no activities, have lots of problems
- Cut jobs, fewer jobs, more unemployment, even more problems

### Social Agreement Regarding Use

- If cultures have little agreement regarding use, or have weak social controls,
  - Those societies have higher rates of consumption
    - Person is also not seen as deviant

### Cultures Also Influence Rate of Use

- French and Italian Drinkers
  - Both Catholic
  - Both make lots of wine and distilled spirits
  - Both drink lots of alcohol
- French
  - Drink wine and spirits
  - Drink with and without meals
  - Drink with and without family
  - Do not disapprove of drunkenness
  - Consider it bad manners to refuse a drink
Italians

- Drink usually with meals
- Drink usually with family
- Usually drink wine
- Strongly disapprove of drunkenness
- Do not pressure people to drink

Comparison of Rates and Problems

- France – One of the highest alcoholism rates in the world
- Italy 1/5 lower rate than France
  - Have strong sanctions against getting drunk - Moderation
  - Type of beverage reduces drunkenness too

Social Communities can Differ

- Idaho State
  - Has many rural communities
  - Many are geographically isolated
  - Have few major industries for economic support
  - Has few activities for members in most communities

Town 1

- Logging town
- Northern Idaho
- Drinking is normative
  - Even among youth
- Close down streets for major community fair
- Lots of drinking and related problems

Town 2

- Farming communities
  - Southern Idaho
- Large LDS and Lutheran presence
  - Alcohol use is frowned upon
  - Drunkenness is discouraged

Result

- More alcohol and alcohol-related problems in Town 1
- Again, community norms and social controls have a major impact on consumption and use rates.
Subculture Models

- Studies indicate many differences among groups in the same population
  - Age, race/ethnicity, religiosity, SES and others
  - All have an impact on use rates

Cahalan

- Examined social variables related to alcoholism
- Results are still applicable today
- Contends that the social environment plays a major role in determining
  - If the person will drink
  - How much the person will drink

Will have sex differences as well

- Females tend to drink less than males
  - Get drunk less often than males
  - Is disapproved of more in females than males
- Depends on the drug
  - Smoking –
    - Cool for females except when pregnant
    - Not cool for males

Other drugs

- Similar results
- Different groups tend to use different drugs
  - Heroin – musicians
  - Spray paint and glue - Inner city youth
  - Rave Clubs - Ecstasy, GHB
  - Marijuana - Youth in general

Problems

- Most societies have few if any alternatives to compounds.
  - Yoga just does not cut it
  - Exercise – takes work
  - Golf
    - Costs money
    - Takes lots of time
    - 19th hole??

Youth

- Needs activities
  - Kids involved with after school activities have fewer alcohol/drug problems
  - Kids with parents at home when they arrive have fewer alcohol/drug problems
  - Kids who have active parents in their lives have fewer alcohol/drug problems
  - Kids with good peer networks USUALLY have fewer alcohol/drug problems
- NOTE: What is “cool” for parents may not be “cool” for kids.
Youth Drug Subculture

- Is different from other subcultures
- Focuses on different activities
- Kids "Hang" with their own
- Reinforce each other
- Often are social outcasts

Labeling Theory

Background

- Does not usually explain why use begins
- Explains why a person comes to view themselves "different" or "deviant" from society
- Deviance = how much one is different from the norms of society or culture
- Deviant = how much a person perceives themselves as different from the norms of a society or culture
- Both are not judgmental terms

Lemert

- Contends we only exert a small amount of control over the image we portray
- We get the image of ourselves from observing the actions and opinions of others
- Ultimately those images influence the definition we have of ourselves.

Example

- Joe/Maria is a 15 year old occasional marijuana user
- Is also very outgoing, does not have a problem talking about things and likes to exaggerate about his use.
- Over time his/her friends begin to perceive him/her as a "stoner"
  - Make comments that he/she is a stoner
  - Begin to exaggerate his/her drug use
  - Begin to dissociate themselves from him/her
  - Over time, Joe/Maria begins to believe they are a stoner
  - Begins to be reinforced by other users
  - Begins to change peer groups and reject the flack he/she receives from their current peer group.
- Use increases

Example 2

- Kid (usually a boy) is active in the classroom
  - May be disruptive as well
- Begins to develop a label from the teacher
- Teacher talks to other teachers/staff at lunch
- Label is attached to the child
- Follows the child as they progress through classes
  - Every "bad" behavior is added to the label
Points
- Even though the child engages in the same behavior as other children, their behavior is seen as problematic, while other children’s behavior are seen as less problematic.
- When child changes grades
- Label follows the child into the next grade
- Even if the behavior changes, the label by the teacher does not
- Variable reinforcement schedule begins
  - Even when the child is good most of the time, one incident will maintain the label for the teachers and staff

Result
- Child does not receive reinforcers or comments for good behavior, only comments on bad behavior
- Due to the label, grading is more strict
  - Same material as good behavior but the child will receive a lower grade for the same performance.

Child Cognition and Behavior Results
- Child school performance deteriorates
  - Reinforces the teachers perception and behavior
- Child perceives themselves as a poor student, deviant, etc.
  - Result – begins to engage in the deviant behavior
- Is perceived by other students as deviant, problematic, a thug, etc.
- May be seen by legal authorities as deviant or problematic
  - Behavior is the same, but consequences and perceptions are different

Ultimate results
- Increased drug use to feel good
- Depression, suicide
- Law enforcement and legal problems

Teacher Study
- Youth in a classroom
- Teacher is told that $\frac{1}{2}$ of the students are very smart, etc.
- Teacher is observed
- Teacher spends more time with the “smart” students than the “less smart”
- Teacher is then told there was an error in who was smart – The other kids were smart
- Teacher is observed
- Teacher spends more time with the previous “less smart” kids and decreases time with the others
- Teacher did not know they were engaging in the behavior

Hard to Change the Label or Group
- Is extremely difficult
- Hard to go from “Bad” to “Good” or “Dumb” to “Smart”
  - Also hard to go from “Good” to “Bad” social groups.
    - Gang want-a-be’s
- Barriers are designed to prevent movement between groups.
Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Reasons

- New group does not want the person
- Try moving from the "Stoner" group to the "Jock" group
- Often need complete severance of ties that have knowledge of social groups
  - Change schools
  - May follow the person as well
- Can change by leaving the location of the label
  - Move cities
  - Graduate from high school
  - If return for reunions, same label returns

Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Analysis

- Is mostly correlational
- Has a lot of face validity
- Has a lot of empirical support as well

Psyc 470 – Introduction to Chemical Addictions

Conclusions

- Lots of sociological models
- Some have more reliability and validity than others
- Do not focus on genetics or biological explanations – Focus is on how the society and groups influence behavior
- Lots of correlational evidence, hard to identify causal variables