Drug Addiction: Sociological Theories

Introduction

This essay attempts to explain how sociological theories presented by sociologists Karl Marx, Howard Becker, and Robert Merton can be used to study drug addiction. Marx's section focusses on Conflict Theory's explanation of drug addiction; Becker's framework uses his theories of Drug Culture and the Labelling Theory of Deviance; while the section on Merton applies his theories of Latent and Manifest Functions, the Strain Theory of Deviance, and Reference Groups to the study of drug addiction. Each sociologist is represented in a section that is comprised of three parts: a discussion of any theories that are relevant to the topic and why, the advantages of those theories in studying drug addiction, and the disadvantages of those theories in studying drug addiction. The conclusion of this essay reviews the contributions of each sociologist, comparing them, and then discussing their functionality in the field of sociology.

Marx: How could Marx's theories be used to study drug addiction?

Conflict Theory

Marx's conflict theory focuses on social class and its influence on people, and to study drug addiction it questions how social class and the means of production impact a person's potential to develop a drug addiction. Marx's Conflict Theory can be used to study drug addiction as it studies who uses drugs and why, how drug addiction is treated and the consequences of drug use, and the motivation of pharmaceutical companies.

Drug users are disproportionately those of a low social class or a minority due to poor quality of life. The capitalist society we live in dictates that, to survive, you must work to make money. If you don't work, don't work at a high paying job, or don't work enough hours to make enough money to live, an individual's security in home ownership, ability to afford food reliably, and also ability to afford reliable transport all decrease. To be able to survive, many must sacrifice treats, entertainment, and socialising with others in order to meet living costs, forgoing the experiences integral to an individual's happiness and quality of life. Drugs, while counterintuitive to the goal of saving money to survive, provide pleasure and a relief from worry, usually at a price they can afford. Drug use sometimes also (seemingly) solving other problems by introducing symptoms such as: loss of appetite, less need for sleep, newfound confidence, amnesia, greater energy, and introduction to a new social group (other drug users). While these symptoms are mostly negative, they can be viewed positively if life is comprised of working and stressing over having enough money to eat and survive. Minority groups, likewise, usually face discrimination that can make finding work difficult and result in them being of a low social class. This can lead to addiction, as drug use to feel pleasure can decline into only feeling pleasure when using drugs. When drug users become addicts, in order to stop drug use they must go through a lengthy recovery process that is often expensive, involves time off work, professional treatment, and many hours of effort. Those who earn a low income usually cannot afford to receive treatment,

which usually results in the drug addict's death: it is easy to overdose on drugs by accident, become manic or experience psychosis and kill themselves accidentally, or just simply starve or die of an illness that they cannot afford to treat.

As to the legality of drugs and their legal consequences, the capitalist society we live in thrives off cheap labour at the expense of human lives. While most countries have criminalised slavery, some (including America and Australia) still allow the use of convicted felons for well below minimum wage employment. This is compounded by the existence of private prisons: prisons that are paid to hold excess felons, and which usually have a deal with governments that they must receive a certain number of prisoners. This means that governments are incentivised to arrest people for profit instead of rehabilitation. For drug addicts, instead of receiving adequate rehabilitation care that focusses on treatment, they are placed in an enclosed area that contains other drug dealers and users that can introduce them to new drugs.

For legal drugs, large corporations who produce these products for profit are incentivised to provide them to as many people as possible. For example, the opioid crisis in America was the direst result of companies wrongly prescribing opiate drugs to people who didn't need them. This resulted in a crackdown on use of these drugs, essentially cutting off drug users cold turkey, which can often be lethal. This encourages those users to receive those drugs elsewhere in order to relieve their pain, producing a new group of drug users who now don't have medical advice on dosage or appropriate use of these drugs, resulting in addiction to these drugs and higher rates of death than if the users were under the care of a medical professional.

Using a Marxist perspective, our society's mode of production directly negatively affects rates of drug addiction.

Advantages of this Approach

Marx's approach provides motives for drug use and addiction, explains the disparity in the social class of drug users and those who don't use drugs, as well as explains the prevalence of drugs in society. Its usefulness in explaining the consequences of drug addiction, as well as the unique perspective on the motivations of those who sell the drugs made this framework especially versatile. It was the only framework to explicitly discuss the Modes of Production of society as a contribution to drug use and addiction.

Disadvantages of this Approach

While Marx answers why those of lower classes use drugs, it does not seem to address how wealthy or successful people can become drug addicts. Another disadvantage to this approach is the constraints of this theory: as almost all of the world's economic system is capitalism, it is unclear whether drug use would be much different in a society not governed under capitalism.

Becker: How could Becker's theories be used to study drug addiction?

Drug Culture

Becker wrote explicitly on drug culture and drug addiction in his article “Becoming a Marihuana User” (1953), although he emphasised that his research was not on the study of drug addiction, stating that “This paper seeks to describe the sequence of changes in attitude and experience which lead to the use of marihuana for pleasure. Marihuana do not produce addiction-” (Becker, 1953). Becker instead studied the factors that led marihuana users to smoke, studying both why they started and why they might continue. Becker’s theory relied heavily on the social interaction of smoking marihuana: drug use does not happen without interaction with drug users. Therefore, drug use (and eventually addiction) rely on the social interactions they have before their first use and every use afterwards. This theory can therefore be extended to almost any drug: while the addictive properties of drugs do contribute to drug addiction, drug use also depends on the social interaction between first-time drug users and experienced drug users. Becker wrote that “An individual will be able to use marihuana for pleasure only when he (1) learns to smoke it in a way that will produce real effects; (2) learns to recognize the effects and connect them with drug use; and (3) learns to enjoy the sensations he perceives” (Becker, 1953). Without guidance on correct technique, information on the drug’s effects, and convincing the user that those effects are positive or enjoyable, first time users might be heavily discouraged from more attempts.

The Labelling Theory of Deviance

Becker’s main research was on the nature of deviance. Indeed, Becker writes that '...social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction creates deviance, and by applying those roles to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by other of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.' The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label.' (Becker, 1963). Illegal drug use is deviant only because our society has deemed it deviant, because norms and deviances are relative. The use of the phrase “by applying those roles to particular people and labelling them as outsiders” is no coincidence; a deviant is not inherently deviant-they become deviant because they are labelled that way (Becker, 1963). Becker believed that being labelled as a deviant resulted in that act becoming a role of the person, like a profession or job would be a role. For a drug user, that act of being labelled as such results in a self-fulfilling prophesy of drug use and addiction. Drug users are labelled as drug users and will feel more at ease in groups of drug users and their use of drugs; the user will reject the values of people who seemingly reject. This is compounded by the criminalisation of drug use, which overall results in a drug user only trusting or interacting with other drug users and potentially becoming addicted to drugs.

Advantages of this Approach

Becker’s theories can be used to discuss why drug users remain drug users, focussing especially on how the social aspect of drug use influences a drug users’ temptation to try more drugs.

Disadvantages of this Approach

Becker does not address the initial motivations of drug use. His research is also based mainly on the use of marihuana, a substance that is not addictive.

Merton: How could Merton’s theories be used to study drug addiction?

Latent Functions and Manifest Function

Merton theorised about latent functions and manifest functions, which describe the differences between the recognised consequences of an act or event and the unrecognised or unintended consequences of an action or event. Using the information presented earlier in Marx’s analysis, we can argue that the latent function of criminalising drug addiction is punishing a dangerous act that can result in serious injury or harm, whereas the manifest function is discrimination against minorities and producing a profit for corporations.

The Strain Theory of Deviance

The strain theory of deviance is similar to Becker’s labelling theory of deviance in the fact that it addresses deviance, although it sets out to explain why individuals become deviant, not how they stay deviant. Merton theorised that there were 5 types of individuals, categorised by their acceptance or rejection of institutionalised means and a socially accepted goal. The two main categories relevant to drug addiction are the Innovators and the Retreatists. The Innovator accepts a socially accepted goal but reject the institutionalised means to achieve it. This type of person is the one most likely to sell drugs; Innovators want to achieve wealth, but not through institutionalised means such as school. The Retreatist, however, rejects both socially accepted goals and the institutionalised means to achieve them, but make no effort to change them. They retreat from society, and are the category most likely to be drug users as they use drugs instead of aspiring to achieve socially accepted goals such as wealth (as drug use usually leads to or unemployment or a low paying job) or legitimate means to achieve these goals (as recreational drug use is typically illegal).

Reference Groups

An argument can be made that Merton’s study of reference groups can be applied to the study of drug addiction. A reference groups major task, according to Merton, “is to search out the patterns through which individuals come to relate themselves to groups to which they do not belong” (Merton, 1936). They can be used to understand the processes of social influence. In other words, what group or groups influence us? In the case of drug addiction, there are many reference groups. Many aspects of popular culture mention drug use, usually not in a completely negative light. News and education resources usually approach drugs negatively, as do many people in positions of power. A drug addict may compare themselves to several of these groups in order to justify their drug use or use any of these groups as an influence.

Advantages of this Approach

This framework could be used to discuss the motivations of drug users in drug use. Out of three sociologists discussed, Merton’s theories were the only ones that discussed the influence of reference groups on people- sometimes people use drugs because those they look up to use drugs. It also briefly explained how someone could continually use drugs in his strain theory of deviance.

Disadvantages of this Approach

A major criticism of Merton’s strain theory of deviance is that people use drugs and alcohol without dropping out of society, as his retreatism category assumed.

Conclusion

In this essay, theories presented by the sociologists Karl Marx, Howard Becker, and Robert Merton were applied to the study of drug addiction.

Marx introduces the idea that those of low social class are more likely to use drugs due to economic pressure. This is somewhat forwarded by Merton’s Strain Theory of Deviance in which he argues that drug users reject socially accepted goals and the institutionalised means to achieve them. Merton’s theory differs as it seems to place most of the onus on the drug user as someone who consciously decides not to achieve socially accepted goals or institutionalised means to achieve them, whereas Marx posited that the drug user had no way to realistically achieve socially accepted goals.

Becker does not comment on the motivation of a drug user, instead commenting on why the drug user remained a drug user. He credits the social interaction that surrounded the first drug experience, as well as finding solidarity in the group of drug users and identifying with them. Marx’s framework was also used to explain why drug users might remain drug users, but instead focussed on how rehabilitation is expensive, most drugs are addictive and can be lethal if a user quits cold turkey, as well as the way drugs become the only way the user feels pleasure or relief from the difficulties In their life.

Both Becker’s and Merton’s theories were applied to the topic of deviance, however Becker’s theories explained how a person can come to claim drug use as part of their identity, whereas Merton’s is used to explain why people may commit deviant acts. Together, both form a comprehensive account of why a deviant act is committed and how it is perpetuated.

The Latent vs. Manifest Functions theory connected well with Marx’s Conflict Theory application when it mentioned that the criminalisation of drugs can be attributed to corporate profit as well as protection of citizens.

In conclusion, I recommend utilising all these theories in the study of drug addiction to present a more nuanced idea of the motivations of drug users, drug dealers, and pharmaceutical companies, as well as the criminalisation of drug users.