

Short Paper

Addiction as a Functional Representation

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how perceptions of the addicted state vary as a function of social conditions, personal circumstances and type of substance. University students ($n=144$) were presented with portrayals of drug users in which sex, drug type and social setting were varied. A questionnaire determined the degree to which participants thought that the person portrayed was (i) addicted, (ii) prone to use drugs due to his/her personality, and (iii) perceived as a problem to society. The pattern of results fitted a functional model of the addiction concept rather than an attempt to describe an 'objective' state. Copyright © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: addiction; drugs; social representations; social construction; theories of addiction

INTRODUCTION

'Scientific' explanations of 'addiction' have commonly taken one of three approaches. First, explanations in terms of disease (e.g. AA, 1965); second, as a response to psycho-social factors (e.g. Cohen, 1990; McMurrin, 1994); third as determined by the pharmacology of substances. Irrespective of their validity, these theories have one factor in common – they are functional, in that they generally attribute blame for undesirable individual or societal behaviour to a specific cause. Drug consumption is extracted from its social and political context and reduced to being the result of either a disease, pharmacology or personal circumstances and characteristics.

Which of these theories is advanced by the non-scientific community appears to depend to a large extent on the purpose to be fulfilled. For instance, in cases when social background explanations are not thought to be appropriate (parents generally do not like to hear that their children's drug use may be linked to an unhappy childhood), explanations may emphasise factors outside family control. A shift in the attribution of blame appears to be brought about by perceived responsibility and blameworthiness (Shaver, 1985).

The meaning of addiction, therefore, depends upon the purpose for which it is used. It becomes apparent that addiction has become a much sought after explanation for

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behaviours which deviate from societal norms. Essentially, the concept functions as a cultural means of distinguishing people who perform an undesirable behaviour from others who do not (Davies, 1992, 1996, 1997).

This piece of research has two aims. First, to place pharmacological and psycho-social explanations for addiction in context and examine the interrelationship between them. Second, to examine the extent to which explanations of addiction can be said to be functional. If, as outlined above, the societal addiction concept is functional (i.e. it is used to explain behaviour which differs from societal norms), it seems reasonable to assume that the degree to which drug users are regarded as having relinquished control over their actions to the drug varies according to specific social settings and norms. Therefore it is hypothesised that by manipulating factors such as psycho-social context or type of drug, the use of the addiction concept will vary despite the explicit consequences of drug use being held constant. It is hypothesised that when drug use is perceived as relatively unproblematic, the concept of addiction is relaxed. Thus the study sets out to demonstrate that the *concept* of addiction is a social construct which varies according to the purposes it is to fulfil.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

144 unpaid university students (70 male; 74 female) volunteered to participate. The age range of the participants was 17–37 and the mean age was 22.49 (SD 3.07).

Materials

Eight black and white photographs portraying 4 individuals (2 males and 2 females) as being middle class (MC) or 'junkies' were used. These individuals were recruited from a theatre group. An example of a set of pictures can be seen in Figures 1a and 1b.

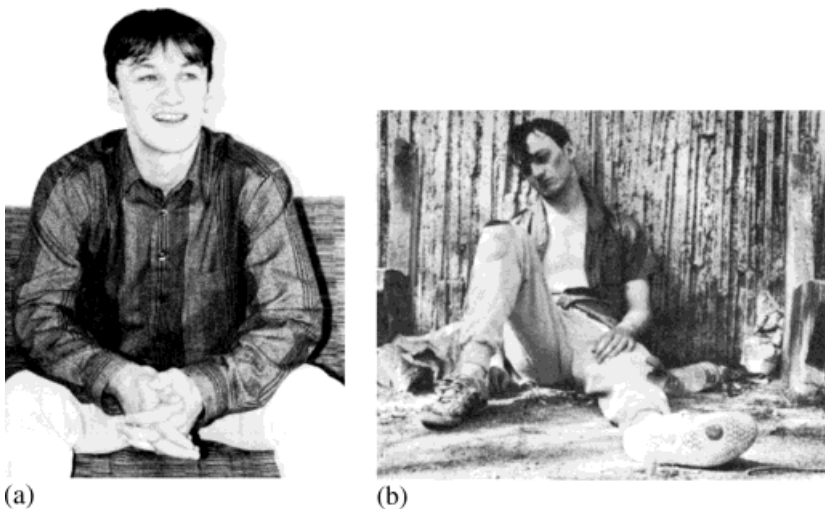


Figure 1. (a) A male MC portrayal. (b) The same person portraying a 'junkie'.

The 'junkie' pictures depicted the individuals shabbily dressed sitting on a pavement. The MC pictures depicted the same persons dressed smartly, sitting on a sofa.

Four written descriptions characterised the portrayals as either: (1) a person who takes heroin twice a day and is a 'down and out'; (2) a person who takes cocaine twice a day and is a 'down and out'; (3) a person who takes heroin twice a day and is a successful MC law student; (4) a person who takes cocaine twice a day and is a successful MC law student. The descriptions were based on examples given in the literature (e.g. Kruse *et al.*, 1996; Harrison, 1994).

A 30-item questionnaire was devised asking participants to rate on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from -2 to +2, how much they agreed with a number of attributional statements. The questionnaire consisted of an 8-item perceived degree of addiction scale (PDA), a 6-item perceived social problem scale (PSP) and a 6-item perceived personality scale (PERPER). High scores indicated a high PDA, PSP, or a personality inclined to use drugs.

The PDA scale is similar to Gossop's (*et al.*, 1995) severity of dependence scale for quantifying the degree of dependence experienced by users in that it uses a number of subjective items which relate to drug-use and control of the habit. The PSP and PERPER statements were based upon the scales developed by Romney and Bynner (1972, cited in Finnigan, 1988).

The PDA scale consisted of statements such as, '*helshe could stop taking heroin (cocaine) if helshe really wanted to*'. The PSP scale consisted of items such as, '*people like her are a menace to society*'. The PERPER score measured the extent to which the depicted person was thought to have personal attributes making him likely to take drugs, with statements like, '*helshe is a very cautious person*'. The remaining 10 questions were 'fillers' (e.g. '*she is creative*'). The items were mixed randomly on different questionnaires to avoid order effects.

DESIGN

A four-way randomised design was employed to avoid transfer effects where each participant rated one portrayal. The 16 different portrayals represented all possible combinations of Drug (Heroin/Cocaine), Photograph ('Junkie'/MC), Description ('Junkie'/MC) and sex of person portrayed. There were thus consonant conditions in which 'junkie' (or MC) descriptions were paired with 'junkie' (or MC) pictures and dissonant conditions, in which 'junkie' descriptions were paired with MC pictures (and vice versa). Of the 144 participants, 96 took part in the consonant conditions and 48 took part in the dissonant conditions.

All participants were questioned individually and were asked to read the portrayal and look at the picture and then to fill in the questionnaire.

RESULTS

PDA scores

A four-way ANOVA was conducted. No portrayal gender effects or interactions were significant. A main effect for the type of description [$F(1, 128) = 36.08, p < 0.001$] and type

of photograph was found [$F(1, 128)=16.194, p < 0.001$]. There was no significant interaction between type of photograph and description [$F(1, 128)=0.004, n.s.$]. For both Descriptions ('junkie' mean: 5.88; MC mean: 1.71) and Photographs ('junkie' mean: 5.19; MC mean: 2.40), 'junkie' portrayals were regarded to be more addicted than MC portrayals.

A significant interaction between Drug and Description was found [$F(1, 128)=19.23, p < 0.001$]. The relevant means are summarised in Table 1. With follow-up *t*-tests using a Bonferroni correction a significant difference was found between the type of description (MC or 'junkie') for heroin [$t(70)=8.42, p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)], but not for cocaine [$t(70)=1.59, n.s.$ (two-tailed)], indicating that 'junkie' and MC portrayals consuming cocaine were perceived to be equally addicted.

A significant difference between the PDA scores for Drug was found in the 'junkie' condition [$t(70)=4.47, p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)] and in the MC condition [$t(70)=3.02, p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)]. These results suggest that heroin was perceived to be more addictive for 'junkie' portrayals, and cocaine more addictive for MC portrayals.

A significant interaction (Table 1) was also found between the type of drug and the type of picture [$F(1, 128)=6.36, p < 0.01$]. Follow-up *t*-tests using a Bonferroni correction showed a significant difference between the types of picture in the heroin conditions [$t(70)=5.73, p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)], but not for cocaine [$t(70)=1.63, n.s.$ (two-tailed)].

A significant difference between the PDA scores for the type of drug was found in the 'junkie' conditions [$t(70)=2.96, p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)]. Owing to the Bonferroni correction, in the MC conditions the difference between the types of drugs fails to reach statistical significance [$t(70)=2.15, n.s.$ (two-tailed)].

Perceived social problem (PSP) scores

A main effect for description ('Junkie' mean was -1.37 ; The MC mean: -4.43) was found [$F(1, 128)=22.75, p < 0.001$] and also for the type of photograph ('Junkie' mean: -1.62 ; MC mean: -4.18), [$F(1, 128)=15.93, p < 0.001$]. There was no significant interaction between description and photograph [$F(1, 128)=4.50, n.s.$].

No significant effects (or interactions) were found for the type of drug or portrayal gender.

Perceived personality (PERPER) scores

An ANOVA was carried out and a main effect was found for the type of description ('Junkie' mean: 2.13; MC mean: 2.06), [$F(1, 128)=73.71, p < 0.001$] and for the type of photograph ('Junkie' mean: 0.67; MC mean: -0.60), [$F(1, 128)=6.71, p < 0.011$]. There was no significant interaction between description and photograph [$F(1, 128)=0.70, n.s.$].

No significant effects (or interactions) were found for the type of drug or portrayal gender.

Table 1. The mean PDA scores (and standard deviations) relevant to the interactions

	Heroin	Cocaine
'Junkie' Description	8.39 (3.74)	4.38 (4.06)
MC Description	-0.33 (4.96)	2.81 (3.78)
'Junkie' Photograph	7.50 (5.03)	4.25 (4.25)
MC Photograph	0.56 (5.26)	2.83 (3.57)

DISCUSSION

The study set out to examine the way explanations for addiction are used functionally to explain drug-taking behaviour.

Pharmacological components of the addiction concept

Popularly, heroin is thought to be more addictive than cocaine (Berridge and Edwards, 1981). In this study, however, no main effect for type of drug was found. Heroin was perceived as more addictive than cocaine in the 'junkie' conditions, but cocaine was perceived as more addictive in the MC conditions. This suggests that degree of perceived addiction is not a straightforward function of pharmacological lay knowledge about how addictive a drug is thought to be, but takes into account popular notions about user groups.

Individual and social components of the addiction concept

A main effect of social context was observed for both heroin and cocaine; the perception of addiction varied in accordance with social context. 'Junkies' were perceived to have a personality more inclined to use drugs than were MC portrayals. Portrayals of drug users as MC reduced the perception of the problematic nature of addiction compared to 'junkies'. In the dissonant conditions portrayals were judged to be less addicted on all three scales. This suggests that popular assessments of the addicted state vary with context.

An effect of drug-type on the PDA scores was observed in both MC and 'junkie' conditions, independent of the consequences of the drug-taking behaviour (which were held constant in both MC and 'junkie' conditions). A model of addiction focusing on the negative consequences and/or social context of drug-taking behaviour is not able to account for this finding. The results can thus not be explained solely by participants rating addiction as the result of a process which leads to an exacerbation of financial and social problems.

Societal and moral components of 'addiction' – drawing the threads together

The results suggest that both the representation and explanation of addiction are constructed from pharmacological, environmental and individual attributes. However, neither pharmacological or individual/societal explanations alone can explain the pattern of results obtained. For example, a model of addiction which regards the consequences or social context of drug use as the determining factor cannot explain why the type of drug influenced perception of addiction when the social context and more importantly the consequences of drug use were held constant.

When the pharmacological or psycho-social explanations of addiction are combined, no consistent interpretation of these results can be made. For example, to reconcile these explanations with the pattern of results one would need to argue that the metabolism for heroin and cocaine varies with social class.

Participants used the components of the addiction concept in a paradoxical and contradictory manner. When it did not make sense to use pharmacological components in the conventional manner (that consuming a more 'addictive' drug will lead to a higher degree of addiction when compared to another drug), participants chose not to. The different explanatory components of the addiction concept enable it to be used differentially according to the functions it is to serve.

As the PSP scores indicate, the concept of 'addiction' appears to be used according to how undesirable a behaviour is, rather than for summarizing 'facts' about how addicted a person is perceived to be. Addiction, it appears, can be understood as a functional

representation of social knowledge of drugs and morals, rather than a summary of (scientific) facts about the addicted state. The utilisation of the addiction concept appears largely to be a function of perceived 'moral health' and how much the use of drugs is seen to disrupt a persons life, similar to the social representation of health and illness (Herzlich, 1973).

Thus, an inherent contradiction in the use of the addiction concept can be identified. On the one hand, the concept is used to alleviate blame for unfavourable individual or societal behaviour. On the other hand, the *same* concept is used simultaneously to stigmatise morally. This exemplifies the concept's tremendous functional value. Indeed, if the concept of addiction were non-existent, society would do well to invent it.

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