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DRUG ATTITUDES AND DISCRIMINATION BETWEEN DRUGS AMONG A GROUP OF ENGLISH SCHOOLCHILDREN

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Summary

This study investigates the attitudes of a group of 185 London schoolchildren towards a number of legal and illegal drugs, and examines the ways in which they discriminate between these drugs. Heroin and LSD were seen as the most dangerous drugs, and alcohol and cigarettes as the safest. Subjects who had a negative attitude towards drugs in general regarded cannabis, amphetamines, alcohol and tobacco as more dangerous than subjects with a neutral or pro-drug attitude. There was also a sex difference: boys claimed to know more about drugs, were more likely to know a cannabis user and to have been "really drunk" than the girls. The implications of these results for drug and alcohol education programmes are discussed.

The use of drugs by young people continues to be a matter of public concern. Dorn and Thompson [1, 2] recently investigated the familiarity with drugs of a large sample of English schoolchildren, and found that 42% knew at least one person who used illegal drugs. Of those who knew a user, a quarter had tried a drug (most commonly cannabis) at some time. On re-testing after a year, the reported levels of drugs use had increased, and the subjects were more likely to have tried other drugs such as stimulants, sedatives and LSD. Dorn and Thompson [2] included a number of attitude items in their study, but their results, although interesting, are presented in rather general terms. Among the attitude items there was little attempt to differentiate between particular drugs (for example, "Drugs are only harmful if taken regularly"), though there is a good deal of evidence that both users and non-users differentiate between specific drugs.

Both Robbins [3] and Gossop and Connell [4] found clear differences in the attitudes of addicts towards cannabis, barbiturates, amphetamines and opiates, and, in a recent study of the attitudes of German army recruits towards drugs, Schenk [5] found several factors which distinguished between "fashion drugs" (including cannabis and hallucinogens), and "semi-medical drugs" (for example, tranquillizers and sleeping pills). Alcohol was perceived differently from other sorts of drugs. The results of these investigations suggest the disadvantages of using only a general concept of "drugs" in attitude studies, but there are also disadvantages involved in the use of pharmacological distinctions since these may not correspond to those made by the subjects.

This study investigates the attitudes of a group of schoolchildren towards a number of legal and illegal drugs, and examines the ways in which they differentiate between these drugs.

Method

Subjects were 185 pupils (80 boys and 105 girls) aged 15 - 16 years from two comprehensive schools in South-East London. They were administered a questionnaire for anonymous and voluntary completion during a class period. Five further pupils declined to take part after seeing the questionnaire.

The subjects were asked to rate their awareness of drug use, their own experience of tobacco and alcohol, the dangerousness of various licit and illicit drugs, and their own attitudes "towards the use of drugs generally" (in terms of a 100-mm linear scale from 0 = extremely opposed to, to 100 = extremely in favour of, drug use).

Results

Subjects were classified by sex and were divided into two attitude groups on the basis of their self-ratings of attitude towards drug use. These showed a skewed distribution, with the majority being opposed to drug use. The mean for the total sample was 32.7, with the boys (mean = 36.3) being slightly more pro-drug than the girls (mean = 30.1; $t = 1.50$, n.s.). Subjects were split into an *anti* group of 43 boys and 63 girls with self-rating below an arbitrary out-off point of 40 and a *neutral-pro* group of 37 boys and 42 girls. The effects of sex and self-rated attitude on the other variables were then assessed. Two-way analyses of variance revealed no significant interactions between sex and attitude, so only main effects are reported.

Two questions were designed to measure general awareness of drug use. The first was "How much do you know about drugs generally?" and required responses in terms of the four categories: 1 = Almost nothing, 2 = A little, 3 = A fair amount, and 4 = A lot. A two-way analysis of variance showed

that boys claimed to know more about drugs than did girls (means were 2.16 and 1.96, respectively; $F = 3.93$, d.f. = 1, 181, $p < 0.05$) and the neutral-pro's claimed to know more than the anti's (means were 2.20 and 1.93), respectively; $F = 7.48$, d.f. = 1, 181, $p < 0.01$).

The second question, "Do you know anyone who has smoked cannabis?" required a Yes/No answer. More of the boys (42.5%) than of the girls (24.8%) responded "yes" ($\chi^2 = 6.52$, $p < 0.02$). Similarly, there were more "yes" responses from the neutral-pro's (49.4%) than from the anti's (19.8%), $\chi^2 = 18.04$, $p < 0.001$).

Subjects then responded to the question "Do you ever smoke cigarettes?" in terms of the four categories: 1 = "No, I've never tried smoking"; 2 = "No, I've tried smoking but don't like it"; 3 = "Yes, on average I smoke less than 1 cigarette a day"; 4 = "Yes, on average I smoke at least 1 cigarette a day". The mean scores indicated more smoking by boys (2.66) than girls (2.36) but this difference was not significant ($F = 3.37$, d.f. = 1, 181, $p < 0.1$). Neutral-pro's were more likely to smoke (2.81) than were anti's (2.25; $F = 12.07$, d.f. = 1, 181, $p < 0.001$). The over-all percentages in the response categories 1 - 4 were, respectively: 21.1, 38.9, 9.7, and 30.3%.

The next question was "Do you ever have an alcoholic drink (such as beer, wine) if you go out with friends?" Responses were made in terms of three categories: 1 = Never, 2 = Very rarely, and 3 = Quite often. Neither the sex nor the attitude main effect approached significance. The over-all percentages in the three response categories were: 12.4, 34.6, and 52.4%, respectively.

The children then had to give a Yes/No answer to the question "Have you ever got really drunk?" This showed a significant sex difference, with 61.3% of the boys and 28.6% of the girls responding "Yes" ($\chi^2 = 19.81$, $p < 0.001$). Also, more neutral-pro's (53.2%) than anti's (34.9%) said "Yes" ($\chi^2 = 6.16$; $p < 0.02$).

Next, subjects were required to rate in terms of four categories (1 = Very safe; 2 = Fairly safe; 3 = Fairly dangerous; and 4 = Very dangerous) the seven types of drugs listed in Table 1, which also gives the means for the two sexes and the two attitude groups, and the F ratios for the two main effects. A few subjects failed to rate some of the drugs, especially barbiturates and amphetamines. Over-all, heroin and LSD were seen as the most dangerous, and alcohol and cigarettes as the least dangerous. Where there were sex differences, boys rated the drugs less dangerous than did girls, and where there were attitudinal differences, anti's rated the drugs as more dangerous. For three of the drugs (heroin, LSD, and barbiturates) the differences between the attitude groups were not significant. The neutral-pro's discriminated more than the anti's between the different drugs. This was shown by calculating for each subject the standard deviation of his or her ratings of the seven drugs. These scores showed a significant rank correlation of 0.16 ($p < 0.02$) with self-rated attitudes after exclusion of 12 subjects whose ratings of the seven drugs were incomplete.

TABLE 1

Mean ratings of dangerousness of different drugs as a function of sex and attitude (scale from 1 = Very safe, to 4 = Very dangerous)

| | <i>n</i> | Boys | Girls | <i>F</i> | Neutral-pro's | Anti's | <i>F</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------|------|-------|----------|---------------|--------|----------|
| Cannabis (marijuana, hash) | 181 | 2.75 | 2.93 | 2.00 | 2.66 | 3.00 | 8.17** |
| Heroin | 183 | 3.78 | 3.72 | 0.90 | 3.71 | 3.79 | 1.30 |
| LSD | 182 | 3.30 | 3.71 | 17.29*** | 3.58 | 3.50 | 1.12 |
| Barbiturates (sleeping pills) | 182 | 2.62 | 2.82 | 3.52 | 2.77 | 2.71 | 0.34 |
| Amphetamines (pep pills) | 176 | 2.44 | 2.81 | 12.44*** | 2.52 | 2.74 | 3.98* |
| Alcohol | 184 | 2.16 | 2.38 | 5.09* | 2.16 | 2.38 | 4.75* |
| Cigarettes | 184 | 2.45 | 2.65 | 3.03 | 2.38 | 2.70 | 8.15** |

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

There are clear differences in the perceived dangerousness of different drugs within the group studied. Heroin and LSD were seen as the most dangerous drugs, whereas alcohol and cigarettes were regarded as comparatively safe; cannabis, barbiturates and amphetamines were each seen as fairly hazardous drugs. This general pattern remains the same when subjects were divided into a pro-neutral group and an anti-drug group in terms of their attitudes towards drugs in general. This reinforces the finding that both drug users and non-users distinguish between different types of drugs [3 - 5] and points to the need for future investigations to avoid the use of a general concept of "drugs". Even within the pro-neutral group, for instance, heroin and LSD were still described as being just as dangerous as they were by the anti-drug group.

There were, however, differences between the pro-neutral and the anti-drug groups in their attitudes towards cannabis, amphetamines, alcohol and cigarettes. In each case the anti-drug group saw these as more dangerous drugs than the pro-neutral subjects. Thus, for our particular sample of school-children, evaluations of these drugs were most predictive of their general attitude towards drugs. These findings are consistent with the position that attitudes need to be measured at an appropriate level of specificity if predictions are to be made as to actual behaviour [6].

Because of their widespread social use, the children could be assumed to have had some experience of cigarettes and alcohol (more than half of the total sample, for instance, said they drank alcohol quite often). It was also

found that 42.5% of the boys and 25% of the girls knew someone who had smoked cannabis. This finding should not be taken to imply that these percentages of the sample provide an estimate of the prevalence of cannabis smoking among English schoolchildren. It is possible that, within a comparatively closed environment such as a school, one or two drug users would be widely known. Among Dorn and Thompson's [2] sample, 8% of a group of schoolchildren claimed to have used cannabis on at least one occasion.

When asked how much they knew about drugs generally, the pro-neutral group claimed to know more than the anti-drug group (though it is by no means clear what they did know). The results also show a sex difference. The boys claimed to know more about drugs; more boys than girls said they knew a cannabis user, and more boys claimed to have been "really drunk", despite the fact that there was no difference between the sexes in the frequency of drinking. In addition the boys had a more favourable attitude towards amphetamines and alcohol than the girls. These findings are consistent with the results of earlier investigations. Vincent [7], for instance, found more favourable attitudes towards smoking cannabis among boys than girls, and Blane *et al.* [8] found a similar result with regard to alcohol use.

Many drug and alcohol education programmes seem to be based upon the assumption that increasing the person's knowledge of drugs will lead to him or her adopting the desired attitude and behaviour [9]. Previous research has found no consistent relationship between knowledge, attitude and behaviour in this area [10, 11].

For such education programmes to be more effective, we suggest that they should concentrate more specifically on those drugs which are likely to be relatively easily available, and whose dangers might be underestimated. In this context, the present results provide some reassurance regarding the negative evaluations given by our subjects to heroin, LSD and barbiturates. However, there may be more cause for concern regarding cigarettes and alcohol. In view of the age of those involved, the frequency of alcohol use by subjects of both sexes, and the percentage of boys reporting that they had been "really drunk", is particularly noteworthy.

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