Drug use as part of culture

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The use of drugs is explained in many ways but most explanations start with the chemical effects of the substance. Use is thought to be related to a desire to experience pleasure or to escape from bad feelings. The use can also be attributed to curiosity or caused by a psychological or physiological dependency. Drug use or dependency is not, however, simply due to chemical reasons.

The use of drugs is almost always culturally dependent. Different national cultures have their own ways of using intoxicants, with subcultures creating and renewing variations in use. All intoxicants are part of a cultural whole.

The various culture-bound environments of intoxicant use can be called intoxicant use contexts. They develop alongside various fashion trends. Intoxicants are part of a whole that consists of a particular type of music, life style and clothing as well as attitudes and ideologies. Viewed from a wider perspective intoxicants symbolise societal structures – they can be part of youth rebellion against adults’ authority or of a need to differentiate from other youth groups.

Even though the new drug culture is often talked about as an amazing, never-before-seen social phenomenon, there has been noticeable usage contexts of intoxicants other than alcohol in the western world. An example could be the use of opium in the United States in the 19th century. The history of cannabis use goes even further back. In the beginning of the 20th century doctors and other health care personnel used morphine, cannabis was actively used by jazz musicians in the 1930’s, and amphetamine and heroin have been used during wars to improve the performance of soldiers and for medicinal purposes.

The first significant, widely-spread drug culture came about for the first time in the mid-1960’s along with the psychedelic ideology and hippie culture. The intoxicants particularly associated with this culture were LSD, other psychedelic drugs and cannabis. The phenomenon started in the United States, particularly in New York and San Francisco, and spread to other western countries reaching also Finland. The unprecedented spreading of the culture was influenced by increased travel, more efficient communication, and widespread media, especially TV and radio. The significance of the cultural context is evident in the fact that when the original hippie ideology began to fade, also the use of drugs decreased considerably in a short period of time. However, this so-called first drug wave left its mark on all drug subcultures that were to follow.

In the 1970’s, youth culture became fragmented and new subcultures were born, drawing less attention but involving drug use. In the party culture associated with disco music, amphetamine derivatives and psychedelic drugs were used. The mod culture in Great Britain was connected heavily with amphetamine use. In the 1980’s, the use of heroin became more common and was related to the development of a new type of drug subculture that was different from the previous ones in that the substance used was an important and defining part of the cultural context. The 1980’s also witnessed an increase in the use of cocaine that was connected to the yuppie phenomenon.

The time period from the late 80’s to the present has been revolutionary as far as the development of new drug use contexts is concerned. It is often called the second drug wave. During this period drug use has increased in all western countries. It started in the marginal rave subculture, but instead of slowly fading like its predecessors, it has, like the rave culture in its entirety, grown steadily and become a part of life for many adolescents or young adults. In many western countries, such as Great Britain, Germany, Holland, Italy and Spain, the use of drugs is no longer considered a marginal culture of adolescents but it has in a way become a normal part of mainstream youth culture. Also in Finland a similar development is possible and even to be expected. There are no signs at the moment of the current trend fading.

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