



## How Did We Get Here? Drug Use Etiology

A Review of

Handbook of Drug Use Etiology: Theory, Methods, and Empirical Findings  
by Lawrence M. Scheier (Ed.)

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Not infrequently when working with alcohol- and other drug-addicted individuals, I would think about the pathways that these people took to get them to the point of addiction. They each have a personal narrative that they use to make sense out of their behavior, and they share this in therapy as they work through their denial.

But that narrative does not necessarily clearly indicate pathways. It is not a simple matter of saying that friends or family or some other opportunity caused the drug use to develop and then to be maintained. It is a complex array of factors that is at the base of the behavior.

The question "How did we get here?" seems all the more pertinent when working with adolescents because that is when drug use development can be seen in its early stages and because of the important effects alcohol and other drug use has on biological, emotional, and social development. The use of drugs can significantly affect the course those lives will take. While the personal narrative will be of value to the clinician working with an individual or group, scientific understanding and social policy need to be based on a more substantial understanding of drug use.

Alcohol and other drug abuse is a significant problem in the United States, affecting not only the user but others associated with the user as well. In spite of the size and the importance of the problem, we do not have a clear understanding of how drug use is initiated and maintained. Such an understanding, even in rudimentary form, could have profound effects on social policy.

Too often, drug use is explained by vague references to such things as poor environment, the wrong crowd, and economic disadvantages, to name just a few. Scientists do recognize that drug use is a complex behavior that is multidetermined. Separating out the variables that make up this complex behavior and evaluating them in a systematic manner are challenging.

The *Handbook of Drug Use Etiology: Theory, Methods, and Empirical Findings* edited by Lawrence Scheier gives the reader a very rich and broad summary of what is currently known. It is a hefty volume, and its 34 chapters vary in degree of data presentation and theory. A strength of this handbook is that its authors lay out clear directions for future research, offering a rich array of problem areas to consider.

## Addressing a Threat

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The history of drug use etiology unfolds historically in response to the public's perception of drugs as a threat to public safety. Given such a focus, its early history is marked by attention to specific groups. The focus would shift as the use of

one substance would replace the use of another. Eventually out of these early efforts, as well as resulting from changes in public policy, the National Institute on Drug Abuse was formed. Over time, its mission, focus, and funding were greatly expanded to reflect a much different public policy understanding of drug use. There are several well-written chapters that detail this development and consider its importance. The authors underscore that the study of etiology has developed as a result of the public perception of threat to public safety. Considerable amounts of data have been collected to evaluate various aspects of drug use. The challenge that remains is how to incorporate all of that information into a model that helps us better appreciate the major risk and protective factors involved in drug use.

There are at least three broad areas that must be considered in order to develop a comprehensive model. These are life-span development (with particular attention to sensitive periods), biopsychosocial and behavioral mechanisms operating on the individual level, and environmental factors and their relationship to developmental and individual factors. This is no small task, and throughout this book the contributors draw attention back to the complexity of the study. The contributors also underscore that the most productive approach is likely to be one that is interdisciplinary, bringing together results from epidemiology, psychology, psychiatry, and sociology. No single discipline is likely to develop the comprehensive model that integrates the three areas addressed above.

## A Focus on Adolescence

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Much attention today is given to adolescent alcohol and drug use. Adolescence as a developmental stage is of interest because it is a time of development in brain regions and systems that regulate critical aspects of behavior, emotions, cognitions, and the perception of risk and reward (Steinberg et al., 2004). It is also a time in life when many start to use alcohol and other drugs. But why?

Popular thinking holds that adolescence is a time of risk taking, a time when an individual feels invulnerable to negative consequences. In and of itself, that is a simplistic and unhelpful explanation. The several authors who address adolescence note that it is a time in life when significant changes are taking place in the biological and psychological domains. These domains do not operate in isolation but interact with many other factors that are environmental and intraindividual in nature.

Important work across disciplinary lines has brought information from neuropsychology and brain imaging into studies of adolescent development and deepened the understanding of neurodevelopmental plasticity and changes in brain structure during this time. Access to data across disciplinary lines helps students of drug use etiology appreciate the complexity of changes operating simultaneously in a number of domains and gives them a deepened appreciation of the growing adolescent brain and the manner in which it solves problems.

Several chapters in this book focus on different aspects of understanding how adolescents grow into drug use. As a group, the contributors emphasize how a multidisciplinary approach will bring us closer to a useful etiological model. Adolescents have multiple anchors in the social environment, including family; peers; nonfamilial adults such as teachers, coaches, and clergy; and the school.

These areas are addressed by several contributors in a manner that comprises more of a broad theoretical overview of how they might be of importance. It is clear that research has often used poorly defined concepts and often ignores the complexity of the developing adolescent. It is also clear from the contributors in this section that there are multiple influences on adolescents and that the interrelations among them are very complex. Much more research is required in this general area to better understand how they interrelate as well as how they influence the development and then maintenance of drug use.

An interesting chapter by Gardner, Barajas, and Brooks-Gunn evaluates the effects of neighborhoods on drug use. They remind the reader of the considerable diversity within neighborhoods as well as between them, and of the effects that socioeconomic status, gender, racial, and cultural composition, broadly understood, have on drug use.

Culture and race are very important factors to consider. It is interesting to note that there is little difference in drug use rates when race is considered but that there are important differences in other factors, such as drug preference, risk

factors for use, and the reported consequences on continued drug use (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003).

Future research that considers use by cultural and racial groupings needs to be informed by a key understanding of the groups under study. This would include attention to diversity within the groups themselves and health disparities between groups. The United States is a culturally complex country. Adding to the complexity are mixed-heritage children who are influenced by the racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural heritages of each parent. This is a rich area for research where little work has yet been done.

## Looking Ahead

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There are several excellent chapters on statistical modeling. Considering the number of factors likely to contribute to the development and then maintenance of drug use, complex models are required to evaluate the relative effects of each factor and then to consider their relative effects over time.

The relative importance of different risk factors is likely to vary with other changes, such as those resulting from development. Good statistical modeling is of great importance in the study of etiology as a means of studying the very large pool of factors that contribute to risk and then systematically eliminating those that are unreliable, have low predictive efficiency, or are strengthened or weakened by the effect of time.

The final contributions consider issues such as the maturing out of drug use, prevention programs, and translating research into practice. Drug abuse is not going away. We see that the widespread use of one substance often diminishes in time as another gains widespread favor. The abuse of prescription medications is a current area of social concern. The challenge remains of how to get past the surface, develop well-researched models of pathways that lead to drug use per se, and further apply that knowledge in ways that improve large-scale prevention efforts. It is clearly not a simple task.

Scheier has done an excellent job of editing this hefty volume. He has brought together contributors across a wide spectrum of issues that inform that study of etiology. He correctly notes in his concluding chapter that the study of drug use etiology, like so many other areas in psychology, benefits from a truly interdisciplinary approach. The human being is a complex animal, and to understand human behavior requires us to look carefully at biological, psychological, and social influences. Further, having a clear perspective on the developmental aspects of behavior will lead to a better understanding of how certain behaviors emerge and then are maintained over time.

The various chapters underscore the importance of a clear language when describing drug use, of well-designed studies that measure with greater precision the variables of interest, and of considering with care how research is translated into practice. The various authors make clear that there is much work yet to be done, and that it is many, many years' worth of work.

This is an excellent volume for the student of drug use. Not all chapters are likely to be of interest to each reader. Nevertheless, the scope of the book is very broad, and those interested in drug abuse will find contributions that will be particularly of interest to them. All things considered, this volume makes an important contribution to explicating what is known and unknown about the etiology of drug use, as well as the important directions that we can embark on to further knowledge in this area.

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