

Negative Emotions, Dropping out of High School, and Drug Use

Sociologists study the dynamics of the self, interaction, social structure, and culture. Questions such as the following are raised: What self-processes emerge over time, and within and across what situations? What occurs when individuals take account of each other? How do people build, sustain, or train social structures? What kinds of symbol systems do humans develop and how do they use them to regulate their conduct? These questions are at the core of the study of sociology. Thus when sociologists turned to the study of emotions, they were interested in how emotions influenced the self, how the flow of interaction was shaped by emotions, how people developed emotional attachments and commitments to social structures and cultural symbols, how emotions sustained or changed social structures and cultural symbols, and how social structures and cultural symbols constrained the experience and expression of emotions. This essay will discuss how emotional processes and social structure are related to the moral/ethical aspects of a specific set of social relations. It will look at the negative emotions that are created in those people that drop out of high school before they graduate, and how these people are more likely to engage in immoral and unethical behaviour such as drug use, as a way of coping. From this essay, it will be clear that, those people who drop out of high school, will experience negative emotions, and are likely to use drugs as a way of coping.

Dropping out of high school is considered in our society to be a negative action that young people do. There are generally zero positives that our society associates with such a decision. It is also generally reported that those that drop out of high school suffer higher unemployment rates, higher arrest rates, greater involvement in violence and even

a propensity to abuse drugs. Essentially those that do not complete high school are often faced with negative social and economic consequences (Drapela, 2006).

According to the social control theory perspective, those that drop out of high school have weakened stakes in conformity, thus making their involvement with drugs much less costly, as they do not have the same prospects for the future as others who have completed high school (Drapela, 2006).

General Strain Theory

This essay will go one step farther and apply the general strain theory to study how people are drawn to drug abuse. The new theory, argues that a person's propensity to abuse drugs is created by more general processes. For example, failing to achieve positively valued goals, or the removal of positively valued stimuli, this can be dropping out of high school. When one drops out of high school, they are having that positive influence removed from them, and this can create negative emotions, such as guilt and shame, which can lead to behaviour like abusing drugs (Drapela, 2006). When one experiences negative emotions from dropping out of high school, they are likely to act in a deviant manner. The effects of this strain can be collective, the succession of many continually occurring negative events, or can even be the product of isolated events. What we are arguing is that when a student drops out of school prematurely, they are faced with a barrage of negative emotions from their parents and other within their social structure, and this causes them to look to drugs as a coping mechanism (Drapela, 2006).

Laurie Drapela (2006) performed a study to test the argument of this paper. She did so for a few reasons. She wanted to consider how the emotion of despair (induced from the social consequences of dropping out of high school) would drive one to abuse drugs. She also does the study because she hopes to get general empirical data that does not presently exist, to support her claim, and the claim of this paper.

The general strain theory suggests that there are three different types of stressors that generate negative emotions that would drive somebody toward deviant behaviour such as drug abuse. Anger is the most prevalent negative emotion in the general strain theory because it stirs up within the dropout, very strong feeling and urges for revenge (on those that are responsible for their negative social circumstance; is related to ones specific social structure), that are counterbalanced by the use of drugs (Drapela, 2006).

There are two additional negative emotions that they theory considers that have different affects on deviant behaviour such as drug abuse. Dropping out of high school can all cause the negative emotions of depression and despair. These emotions can result in “inner-directed delinquency” (Drapela, 2006, p. 761) which can be drug abuse. These emotions do not result in the same level of inhibition that anger provides, but can still result in the same results, that being turning to drugs as a coping mechanism (Drapela, 2006).

The general strain theory asserts that drug abuse is a natural consequence of dropping out of high school, and a unique adaptation from delinquency “because it is conceptualized as a way of managing (or escaping) negative emotions brought on by strain,” such as that experienced from dropping out of high school, “rather than reacting to such emotions with volatility” (Drapela, 2006, p. 756).

Strain theory has been a popular way to explain drug abuse and other deviant behaviour among those that dropped out of university. However, it must also be noted, that simply the act of dropping out of school cannot be regarded as the sole reason for one dropping out of school. The proximate factors present within that person environment must also be considered, as they also play a role in whether that dropout will turn to drugs (Drapela, 2006). With this said, it can still be asserted that dropping out of school, according to the strain theory, will cause negative emotions within the person, that they are very likely to engage in drug abuse as a way of coping.

Drapela's 2006 study emphasizes the negative emotions that are caused by the parental reaction of the student dropping out of school. This negative reaction by the parents is in focus because they operationalize a type of strain thought to be associated with crime and deviance: negative relations with parents. This is especially relevant in our society that places so much emphasis on education as the way to achieve social mobility, and as such, most parents expect their children/teenagers to get an education, and not dropout prematurely. These negative emotions that the dropout experiences with their parents may create negative emotions that the dropout chooses to counterbalance with drug use, and possible abuse (Drapela, 2006). Drapela focuses of the emotion of despair as an emotional response created from their parent's reaction to their dropping out. She says that this is often an overlooked emotion that is caused by parental reaction and response to the act of dropping out. The forces that these negative emotions illicit in the dropout cause them to be much more likely to abuse drugs than someone who does not drop out of high school, and does not experience the same degree of negative emotion (it is not being said that those in high school do not experience negative emotions, as they

likely do, but this is a different topic worthy of a different study). If the parents did not create those negative emotions within their dropout child, for example, if their response was more neutral or assistance-based, then the dropouts would not experience the negative emotions to the same degree, and would be less likely to engage in drug abuse as a way of coping (Drapela, 2006).

Effects of being excluded of the Social Structure

In their paper, *Social Exclusion Decreases Prosocial Behaviour*, authors Twenge, Ciarocco, Bartel, Baumeister and DeWall argue along the same lines. Their research does not touch on the issue of dropping out of high school, but they do argue that when people are excluded from the status-quo of the social structure, they are less likely to engage in prosocial behaviour, a category which drug-use does not fit into.

What we can gain from the research done in this study is that those students and young people that drop out of high school will consequently experience a level of social exclusion. They no longer spend the days in class with their social peers, they no longer associate with the social status-quo of being in school, and they no longer get to identify as being a student. In many ways, dropping out of high school, means that one is excluded from the social environment. Now it might be thought that someone in this position would not like the negative emotions that they were feeling as a result of this exclusion, and would therefore go the extra-mile, to remove them from this situation of exclusion, by engaging on “prosocial” behaviour. However, the results from the study show that the opposite is true. Prosocial behaviour is not a strategy that rejected or

excluded people use to become included once again. “The reduced ability to empathize with others undercuts the inclination to provide help, and reduced trust may also hamper and willingness to make the first move” (Twenge *et al.*, 2007, p. 65).

According to their study, emotion is a crucial factor here. The behavioural responses of social rejection, such as drug abuse, do not rely on emotional distress that is a direct cause of behaviour. It is the rejection that causes their emotional system to become derailed, and thus lead them to drug abuse as a coping mechanism (Twenge *et al.*, 2007).

People who are experiencing social exclusion as a result of dropping out of high school do not engage in prosocial behaviour as a means of gaining back their inclusion in the social structure. The study shows that people who prefer to step back from their emotions, perhaps by engaging in drugs, as a way of protecting themselves from further distress. Other people also loss the inclination to help because they no longer relate to the person because of their new, drug-enabled behaviour (Twenge *et al.*, 2007).

Self-Conscious Emotions

When one drops out of high school, they are undoubtedly going to face “self-conscious emotions” (Tangney, 2007, p. 347). These are emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment and pride that are evoked by self-reflection and self-evaluation. This self-evaluation can be in the form of explicit or implicit, consciously experienced or experienced outside our awareness. The self is the object of these kinds of emotions. These emotions provide for a way to punish or reward one’s self for their behaviour. As

such, when a young student drops out of high school, they are likely to experience the self-conscious emotions of shame, guilt, and embarrassment for their action. These emotions can then act to affect the moral actions taken by the self. This can include the immoral action of drug abuse (Tangney, 2007).

Shame and guilt are two of the most prominent negative, self-conscious emotions that are experienced by someone who drops out of high school. Research done by Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek serves to further illustrate the thesis of this paper, that the negative emotions experienced by someone dropping out of high school, make them much more likely to engage in drug abuse as a coping mechanism. Those suffering from shame and guilt are likely to suffer from a wide-range of psychological symptoms. The negative implications involved with these emotions can lead people to deviant behaviour, such as drug abuse (Tangney, 2007).

The research presented in their study, that those suffering from guilt are more likely to engage in antisocial and risky behaviour, such as drug use. Also, those that do not feel negative emotions such as shame and guilt have a better respect for the social norms, such as the one that deems drugs to be immoral and bad (Tangney, 2007). What can be taken from their study is the assertion that, those students that drop out of high school and experience feeling of shame and guilt (which is likely to happen), will be more likely to engage in drug use as means of coping with their negative emotions.

This essay has discussed how emotional processes and social structure are related to the moral/ethical aspects of a specific set of social relations. We looked at the negative emotions that are created in those people that drop out of high school before they graduate, and how these people are more likely to engage in immoral and unethical

behaviour such as drug use, as a way of coping. It is clear that people who drop out of high school will experience negative emotions, and are likely to use drugs as a way of coping.

Bibliography

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