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LSD and Marihuana

It is characteristic of youth to rebel against accepted values and to test himself and his environment, often to the point of no return. Nevertheless, the use of psychedelic drugs would not have become so widespread had not the press glamorized them. Frank Barron* has said: "The chemical substance most instrumental in the spread of the psychedelic movement is printer's ink. . . . The slick-paper picture magazines of large circulation . . . have used a device . . . : they deplore the excesses that they are at pains to picture and they warn of dangers while at the same time suggesting the appeal of what they dramatize."

Today these drugs are being tried by a substantial fraction of the best of our nation's youth. A massive uncontrolled experiment is being conducted whose total cost cannot now be determined. The current favorite among university students is marihuana. At a recent symposium held at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, Dana L. Farnsworth of Harvard estimated that 30 to 35 percent of the students at major universities on the East and West coasts had tried marihuana at least once. About half the students did not repeat the experiment. Farnsworth reported that 5 percent of the students had tried LSD, at the height of its popularity several years ago. Current use is probably under 1 percent. He attributed this decline to an awareness among students that the drug has untoward effects.

Some of the sequelae have been cited by Donald B. Louria.* Among the adverse effects of LSD are schizophrenic reactions, paranoid reactions, psychotic depression, chronic anxiety reactions, and acting out of suicidal tendencies. Louria described observations on some 130 inpatients at Bellevue Hospital. Each was admitted for LSD-induced psychosis or LSD-caused exacerbation of an established psychiatric disorder. About a sixth of the patients had not recovered after 2 weeks and were referred for potential long-term hospitalization. Chronic abuse of LSD often leads to "a solipsistic, negativistic existence in which LSD becomes synonymous with life itself."

Although students are aware of at least some of these mental effects, they are more impressed by reports of chromosomal damage and possible birth defects arising from the use of LSD. Such reports have had a sobering effect exceeding that of any preaching by adults.

While the use of LSD seems to be decreasing, the use of marihuana appears to be growing, both in high schools and in universities. The inconclusive information about marihuana is not reassuring. Although no direct connection between marihuana and heroin has been established, the social setting in which "pot" is used is conducive to other, more serious adventures. Some of the effects of marihuana seem reminiscent of LSD. Large doses may produce confusion, disorientation, and increased anxiety and psychoses lasting hours or sometimes weeks. In the Middle East habitual use of marihuana leads to a cannabis psychosis† whose victims are reminiscent of the derelicts of skid row.

In the United States in the past, use of marihuana was largely confined to individuals in the lower socioeconomic levels. Today some of our finest youth are engaged in experiments that could have very damaging long-term effects. Evaluating the consequences of this fad is a task of the highest priority.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* *LSD, Man & Society*, R. C. DeBold and R. C. Leaf, Eds. (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1967). †W. H. McGlothlin, in *The Marihuana Papers*, D. Solomon, Ed. (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1966), page 412.