

Original Research Article

A brief discussion on the behavior of students' drug using under the perspective of youth subculture and the intervention of school social work

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Abstract: Under the influence of globalization, the use of synthetic drugs among teenagers has become a key issue to be addressed in schools, making school social work imperative (Wang, 2006). Students' drug use is not only closely related to social culture and economic background, but also significantly influenced by youth subculture. School social workers should develop the awareness to interpret drug use behavior from a cultural perspective, so as to effectively reorganize and reconstruct relevant youth subcultures, create a vibrant cultural environment, and implement drug abuse prevention education as well as crisis intervention for adolescents.

Keywords: teenagers' synthetic drug use; youth subculture; school social work; drug abuse prevention education; adolescent drug crisis intervention

1. Research background

In school social work, the issue of drug abuse cannot be underestimated. On one hand, the number of adolescents abusing drugs is considerable. According to China Drug Situation Report 2021 (National Narcotics Control Commission, 2021), by the end of 2021, the number of drug users discovered and registered nationwide reached 2.955 million, including 480,000 newly identified drug users in that year. Referring to the internationally used ratio of manifest to latent drug users, the actual number of drug users exceeds 14 million. The trend toward younger and more diversified drug users is increasingly evident. By the end of 2021, the total number of drug users discovered and registered nationwide under the age of 18 was 29,000, while those between the ages of 18 and 35 reached 1.659 million, accounting for 57.1% of all drug users. Among the 480,000 new drug users in 2021, 18,000 were under the age of 18, and nearly 70% were between the ages of 18 and 35. Thus, the task of drug prevention education for adolescents remains a serious challenge.

On the other hand, school social workers often analyze and interpret student drug abuse from perspectives such as social, familial, and individual causes (Fan, 2007), focusing on external education processes and personal choice, and frequently associating it with theories of deviance. However, they rarely examine it from a subcultural perspective—That is, as a representation of social meaning. As subjects of specific social action, adolescents embody a trinity of biological actors, cultural actors, and social actors. Therefore, the causes of adolescent drug abuse extend beyond social drivers and biological instincts such as curiosity, and are often strongly linked to youth subcultures. Developing cultural consciousness among school social workers, understanding youth subcultures, and addressing problems from a cultural perspective through fine-grained education can help nip drug use in the bud, make students aware of its consequences, and reduce the rate of juvenile drug abuse and related crimes. This constitutes the next key objective of our work.

2. Youth subculture

"Youth culture" generally refers to the various ways in which adolescents distinguish themselves from the adult cultural communities to which their parents belong. Because of this characteristic of separating from adult society, the phenomenon of youth culture is usually interpreted by incorporating it into various youth subcultures. The concept of youth subculture emphasizes the resistance consciousness of young people, who consciously distinguish themselves from the dominant mainstream society, and reflects specific cultural and

political behaviors and demands of the youth.

Regarding the definition of youth subculture, this paper mainly refines and develops it on the basis of the Birmingham School's definition. In its theory of youth subculture, the Birmingham School combined semiotics theory and gradually regarded "youth subculture" as the "form of meaning" through which certain youth groups express their daily lives, and as a symbolic system that constitutes the distinctive lifestyles of minority youth groups—"style." Style includes not only all the "stuff" used by a group in daily life, but also the ways in which they use this "stuff," as well as their common and specific modes of speech, behavior, and other symbolic elements. The Birmingham School strives to uncover the potential of "ritual resistance" embedded in youth subculture groups occupying a disadvantaged position.

From this perspective and standpoint, the Birmingham School also attempts to highlight the "revolutionary energy" underlying youth subculture. Various youth subculture groups and phenomena generally carry a clear consciousness of resistance and identity demands. In other words, youth subculture groups seek to challenge and subvert the cultural hegemony of the dominant class through their unique forms of expression.

3. The reasons for youth subculture inducing the abuse of synthetic drugs

Synthetic drugs, also known as "new drugs," refer to a class of psychotropic substances synthesized chemically, as opposed to traditional narcotic drugs such as opium, morphine, and heroin. Synthetic drugs directly affect the human central nervous system, either by stimulating, hallucinating, or inhibiting it. Continuous use leads to addiction. At present, the synthetic drugs most frequently abused include methamphetamine, ketamine (K powder), and ecstasy, among others. The abuse of such synthetic drugs is often deeply rooted in cultural incentives.

3.1. Rebellious consciousness advocated by youth subculture

Adolescence is a critical stage of life during which an individual's physiology, psychology, and personality begin to mature. During this period, students' psychological and behavioral choices exhibit a strong sense of autonomy, and they become highly sensitive and curious about their external environment. One of the themes of youth subculture is rebellion against tradition. When adolescents identifying with certain subcultural groups, find their urgent need for self-fulfillment unmet, they express independence and individual opinions by rebelling against family discipline and deliberately rejecting school education. Drug abuse becomes one of the means to express resistance to mainstream culture and authority. On the one hand, drug users encounter exclusion in concepts, social environment, and institutional systems. On the other hand, they actively detach themselves from society, enabling adolescent drug users to achieve a sense of self-fulfillment and cultural satisfaction through "rebellion."

3.2. Sense of identity recognition provided by youth subculture

Adolescent groups seek self-recognition, emotional connection, mutual trust, and a sense of security and belonging in interpersonal relationships. If teenagers find it difficult to establish close relationships with mainstream society through traditional channels such as family, school, and community, they may turn to youth subculture to compensate for the fractured social network. Youth subculture stresses "relative uniqueness" and offers a certain sense of identity. Without proper guidance, adolescents are highly likely to enter the drug subculture circle (Fei, 2010). Existing research shows that adolescent drug use is closely tied to peer groups and drug subculture circles, which frequently overlap for drug-using adolescents (Fei, 2010). Adolescent drug users become interconnected through shared values and distinctive discursive systems, such as referring to drug use as "skating," which undermines fear and guilt toward drug use and gradually transforms into a sense of belonging within the drug subculture.

3.3. Establishment of "autonomy" advocated by youth subculture

As academic, life, and social pressures increase during adolescence, students often perceive themselves as being at the "bottom of society" and feel overwhelmed and powerless. In youth subculture, however, the emphasis is on "finding yourself" and discovering true value. This emphasis can lead some young students, eager to pursue "freedom" and "authenticity" but lack proper guidance, to seek stimulation in drugs. Because of their

hallucinogenic nature, drugs offer adolescents in disadvantaged positions an escape from real-life hardships and difficulties, providing temporary "pleasure" and a sense of "achievement" in a fantasy world. They pursue relief and emotional release by controlling physiological reactions, thereby constructing the "autonomy" they aspire to.

4. Intervention methods of school social work

4.1. Constructing an "Anti-Drug" cultural circle

School social workers should not only pay attention to the educational and living environments within the "school–family–community" triad, but also focus on the cultural environment in which adolescents are situated. First, considering that most students' cultural activities now take place online, we can rely on campus networks, campus WeChat platforms, and similar channels to actively publicize the school's anti-drug education initiatives and achievements, carry out online campaigns, reduce dependence on the physical environment, and help spread drug-related knowledge more widely. This approach can further expand the audience base and form a preliminary "anti-drug" knowledge cultural circle. Second, fundamentally addressing the problem of drug abuse still requires preventing the emergence of new drug users. School social workers should work to completely separate the words and meanings of "drugs" and "drug-taking behaviors" from those of "innovation," "autonomy," and similar terms, and regard all in-school students as targets of intervention. Through social work interventions, students should be made aware of the harmfulness of drugs, maintain a high level of vigilance, and recognize that regardless of the culture they identify with or the cultural group they belong to, the abuse of synthetic drugs is extremely damaging to themselves. In this way, a secondary cultural circle of "recognition" can be established. By fully mobilizing the in-depth participation of schools, with the support of higher educational authorities, compulsory detoxification centers, universities, and other organizations, multi-party resources can be coordinated to conduct education and publicity, thereby further expanding the anti-drug cultural circle.

4.2. Removing the negative cultural labels of students

For students who have already taken drugs or who have the intention to do so, school social workers should reconstruct their cognition and remove their self-imposed labels. Influenced by their cultural identification and peer support systems, such students often define themselves as "drug users," "unpopular people," or "only fit to take drugs with gangsters." At this stage, their other roles and self-awareness gradually retreat to the "background," and they no longer focus on their abilities or personal aspirations. Instead, a "negative" self-label, along with the associated derogatory terms, easily distorts their self-image into that of a "problematic person." This erroneous self-awareness negatively shapes their self-perception, leading to cognitive distortions that affect behavior and hinder normal development. Therefore, it is particularly important to remove the internalized labels that such students attach to themselves. Their cultural circles and peer support systems should be broken, and they should be integrated into a new cultural environment, rebuild social support networks, and explore their internal strengths. In this way, their social and labeling connections with drugs can be severed.

4.3. Empowering students

Social workers must adhere to professional principles, acting as service providers and advocates for the positive actions of at-risk students, and help them coordinate the advantageous resources around them. Unlike other professional disciplines, the primary aim of social work is to help others help themselves, with the essence of the service being to teach them "how to fish" (Fan, 2007). First, social workers should provide emotional support to students affected by drug addiction, help them release emotions, understand their inner world through interviews, analyze their growth environment, assist in rebuilding confidence, and carry out regular casework activities. Next, social workers should help uncover both the potential of at-risk students and the potential resources available to them (Xu, 2009). Unlocking their potential begins with a strengths-based perspective: Identifying the resources inherent in the students themselves, guiding them to view themselves positively, discover their talents, interests, and hobbies, and tap into external resources, including family, school, community, and broader social networks. By collecting all useful information, integrating resources appropriately, and ensuring resource sharing across various systems, complementary advantages can be realized, and problems can be addressed collectively. Ultimately, this process contributes to the formation of a positive

cultural circle.

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