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Drugged: Research and Policymakers Confronting Illicit and Illegal Drugs

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Title: Drugged: Research and Policymakers Confronting Illicit and Illegal Drugs

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Abstract. This article explores the application of research on policies towards illicit and illegal drugs.

A recent article in *Society* (MacCoun, 2001) highlights examples of biases and distortions in interpreting research on policies towards illicit and illegal drugs. One major example is "constrained directional bias" wherein consumers of research construct an interpretation of data and conclusions as close as possible to what they had hoped the research would support before the research is even read. Here the consumers attempt to break free as much as they can from the confines of methodology, statistical tests of significance, and the data themselves. How much they can break free has as much to do with their psychological investment in bottom line conclusions as it does with strengths and weaknesses of the research at hand. Moreover, that which supports pre-existing positions is given a much less rigorous appraisal than that which seems to disconfirm such positions. This flight to what already is believed beyond what research suggests often is even more pronounced when research is "equivocal or ambiguous."

The upshot of the *Society* article is that many researchers seem to be confronted with a Sisyphean task. Admittedly, some researchers who are eminently or imminently corruptible may decide to construct what they believe will be more easily constructed by consumers bearing grants, employment opportunities, or other exemplars of prestige and power. However, others seem to be dedicated to honestly informing policymakers through modes of discovery and explication that do not crack the imperviousness of consumer bias and distortions. That is, more elegant choices of cohorts, procedures, and manipulations of data may bring little of surplus value to policymakers.

A lay psychologist might posit that once policymakers arrive at the conclusion that the use of various psychoactive substances should be illicit or illegal, policies designed to prevent or minimize use may die a thousand deaths but cannot be laid to rest without endangering the conclusions setting the need for policies in motion. Thus, some public education programs geared towards school-aged youth--e.g., DARE--continue years after their ineffectiveness has been amply demonstrated by the canons of science. Thus, the same tired interventions of eradication through fumigation or manual destruction, crop substitution, interdiction, and the like succeed only in temporarily modifying the locale--not the magnitude--of aspects of the problem. Meanwhile, policymakers' psychodynamics and their beliefs concerning religion, ethics, morals, the nature of youth, and various levels of politics most often escape researchers' professional interests even as they constitute the interests of policymakers who fund and shape researchers' professional interests.

One might conclude that much as a drugged state can harm the application of reason and empiricism in the public interest, so can the social psychological process of drug policymaking and its amen corner of researchers. (See Eylon, D., Giacalone, R.A., & Pollard, H.G. (2000). Beyond contractual interpretation: Bias in arbitrators' case perceptions and award recommendations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21, 513-524; Forero, J. (March 17, 2001). In the war on coca, Colombian growers simply move along. *The New York Times*, pp. A1; A5; MacCoun, R.J. (2001). American distortion of Dutch drug statistics. *Society*, 38, 23-26, <http://www.catchword.com/Titles/tranpub/01472011/v38n3/contp1-1.htm>; Harmon-Jones,

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