

HSRC/HCPF

Health Services Research Committee/Health Care & Promotion Fund

**Their Own Words, Their Own World:
Empowering At-Risk Young People in Drug Education**

Submitted to the Health Services Research Committee October 1999

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Attached

- 1) Contents of Accompanying Video Tape
- 2) Financial Statement
- 3) Dissemination
- 4) Paper Under Review

Jones, Rodney. Mediated Addiction: The Drug Related Discourse of 'At-Risk Youth' in Hong Kong. (Submitted to *Addiction Research*)

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by Health Care and Promotion Fund Grant #257102. The researchers would like to thank the young people who participated in the project and the rehabilitation and outreach programs and youth centers which assisted in recruitment. We would also like to express special thanks to the project's research assistant, Wendy Tsang, for her dedication to and faith in the project and her role in bringing it to successful completion.

Summary

Little is known about the effect of televised anti-drug messages on young people at different stages of their involvement with illegal drugs or about the ways young people in Hong Kong talk about drugs, and the relationship between their discourse and their behavior. The goals of this study were to explore both the linguistic behavior of Hong Kong young people around the topic of drug use and to examine how these ‘ways of speaking’ affect how they respond to mediated drug prevention messages. Three groups of young people at different stages of the ‘drug-using careers’ were given a course in video production and asked to produce videos portraying their own perceptions of drug use. Analysis of the videos and the interaction of participants while they were making them suggests that their negative assessments of government anti-drug commercials was in part the result of the failure of the commercials to conform to the ‘Discourses’ participants used in their everyday social interaction and their need to assert the ‘legitimacy’ of these ‘Discourses’. The study points to the limitations of televised anti-drug messages in affecting behavior and suggests that intervention programs for Hong Kong at-risk youth use should take into account the *social function* different ‘Drug Discourses’ have for young people and provide structured activities in which clients can assert the legitimacy of their real life experiences and reflect on the assumptions underlying the ways they talk about drugs both with peers and with authority figures.

Introduction

Very little is known about the effectiveness of televised anti-drug messages on young people in Hong Kong, and even less about the effect of such messages on youngsters already involved in illegal drug use. Previous quantitative studies have tended to gauge 'awareness' through the measurement of 'message recall' and the degree to which respondents' interpretation of the messages conformed to the intentions of their producers. One such study undertaken by the Central Registry for Drug Abuse in 1994¹ found that although most of the respondents had seen the four API's mentioned in the survey, a majority perceived the message 'correctly' for only one of the four, two others being understood by only about a third of the respondents, and the fourth by only about a tenth of the respondents. These alarming finding aside, the problem with such approaches is first that they tell us very little about *why* viewers respond the way they do to televised messages about drugs and *how* these messages can be made more effective, and second that they adopt an overly simplistic view of communication which sees messages as having unambiguously 'right' or 'wrong' interpretations.

This study employs a more qualitative approach which attempts to gain an *emic* understanding of viewers' experiences with media anti-drug messages by providing three groups of young people with the equipment and technical skills to make their own videos about drugs.

The theoretical roots of the study come from recent work in psychology which focuses on the way people talk about drugs as a kind of social interaction learned within communities of practice and serving particular functions within particular social contexts. Understanding how young people respond to anti-drug messages, we argue, requires and

understanding of the different ‘Discourses’² * they already have available to talk about and think about drugs and how these Discourses enable them to enact different ‘preferred’ social roles when engaged in different activities with different groups. Davies³ asserts that drug discourses can be divided into various ‘types’, each with its own linguistic features and each enabling participation in different social practices. Rather than focusing on these discourses as indications of what is going on ‘inside the heads’ of drug users’, Davies contends that the importance of these ways of speaking is their *functionality*, how drug users use them to project social identities, and how they operate to either limit or amplify participation in different paths to recovery.

The aims of this project were to determine the linguistic and conceptual models different groups of drug using and non-drug using young people in Hong Kong use to structure their understanding of anti-drug media messages and to examine the communicative repertoires of these social groups, their language use/choices, communication strategies and group-decision making processes.

Methods

The methodology used in this project was inspired by recent work in linguistics⁴ and communications studies⁵. Three groups of young people, each with different histories of drug use (see Appendix 1), were given a ten week course in video production (see Appendix 2) and asked to produce their own short videos about drugs. The first group consisted of seven males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight recruited from a religious-oriented live-in rehabilitation center. All of them had experience with heroin and had been arrested for drug possession. The second group consisted of three girls (two

* In the remainder of this report, the term ‘Discourses’ (with a capital D) will, after Gee (1996), be used to refer to conventionalized ways of speaking and thinking about a particular topic, to distinguish it from

aged fourteen and one aged seventeen) and one boy (aged eighteen) recruited from a government sponsored youth outreach program. The girls had had experience with such drugs as marijuana, ecstasy and codeine, while the boy was a heroin user. The third group, recruited from a private youth center, was made up of five males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one with little or no experience of drug use. All of them, however, had friends who used drugs and had witnessed people using drugs in various social contexts.

The course was administered by a trained social worker and a technical instructor, and all of the sessions, including formal classroom instruction, group planning, video shooting and editing were taped and transcribed. As part of the course, participants were invited to view and critique a series of anti-drug APIs (Announcements in the Public Interest) produced by the Hong Kong government in terms of both their content and the techniques used. It was stressed, however, that participants were not meant to reproduce the messages in the APIs, but instead to *respond* to them in the form of videos portraying their own perspective on drug use derived from their own experiences.

The data, including both the transcriptions of interaction among participants and the videos which they produced, were analyzed using an approach in which the conceptual categories researchers began with were gradually refined and modified as they interacted with empirical categories suggested by the data itself. Chief among these conceptual categories were Davies's six kinds of 'drugspeak'. Our aim, however, was not to fit the discourse of our participants into the categories described by Davies, which he himself maintains are highly culture specific, but to attempt to construct a similar model of drug Discourses consistent with the actual language use of our participants.

'discourse' (with a lower case d) which refers to language use in more general terms.

Furthermore, the focus was not just on describing the various Discourses participants appropriated, but in examining their *functionality*, that is, how they were deployed in particular moments of interaction to perform particular social and discursive actions. Therefore, special attention was paid to ‘critical moments’ in the interaction involving conflicts between participants and instructors or among participants themselves. In addition, the data was subjected to a detailed content analysis through which a number of important themes relating to attitudes towards drug use, treatment, peers, family members and authorities were derived. The coding was done separately by an English speaking researcher working from English translations and a Cantonese speaking research assistant working from original Cantonese versions both using a program for qualitative data analysis called WinMax. Inconsistencies between coders were passed on to a third Cantonese speaking consultant for further consideration. Coded segments on which agreement could not be reached were discounted in the analysis.

Results and Discussion

Drug Discourses

Analysis of the interaction among participants revealed very different patterns of communication regarding drugs in the three different groups. These different ways of talking about drugs could be linked both to the differing experiences of the different participants and to the social contexts in which the interaction occurred.

The group of recovering heroin users employed two different types of Discourse, depending on the kinds of tasks they were involved in. In more formal, structured task which involved monologic communication, they deployed what we have labeled a ‘Religious-oriented Recovery Discourse’ which portrayed their drug use as problematic

and non-volitional and 'recovery' as a matter of surrendering to the help of counselors and family members and a 'higher power'. At other times, however, particularly when they were involved in 'debates' with teachers and social workers, these participants employed a very different kind of Discourse, what we have termed a 'Hedonistic Discourse', which portrayed their drug use as volitional and having concrete and practical benefits and emphasized the participants' 'expertise' about the subject in contrast to the lack of direct experience of drug use of the teachers of the course and social workers in their recovery program.

Whereas the same participants in the first group employed contradictory Discourses, in the second group, consisting of three drug users in the early stages of drug use and one in the early stages of recovery from heroin addiction, the discursive contradictions were observed *between* the two types of participants. The 'recreational' drug-taking girls employed a 'Hedonistic Discourse' which, like that observed in the first group, portrayed drug use as positive and volitional, and was used to assert a kind of 'expertise' or 'authority' when challenging the positions of teachers and social workers. In contrast, the boy, who had experienced negative consequences related to his heroin use, employed a Discourse which portrayed drug use as problematic but which lacked the structure of the 'Recovery Discourse' of group one's participants. One of the most interesting findings regarding this group was how, as the course progressed, the girls were increasingly willing to violate their 'Hedonistic Discourse' and participate with the boy in discussions of the problematic aspects of drug use.

The Discourse employed by the group of 'at-risk' non drug users was characterized by elements of both the 'Hedonistic Discourse' and the 'Recovery

Discourse'. On the one hand they acknowledged the problematic aspects of drug use and focused on it as an 'addictive' (non-volitional), pathological behavior, while, on the other hand, like users of the 'Hedonistic Discourse', they associated drug use with a certain degree of 'expertise', the demonstration of which had positive connotations within the group. In particular, participants expressed a kind of 'fascination' with the physical or 'technical' aspects of taking drugs and seemed to enjoy 'showing off' their knowledge of these aspects.

Responses to Government Produced Anti-Drug Messages

Consistent with the different ways these three groups of participants talked about drugs, their assessments of government anti-drug APIs and the ways they 'responded' to them in their own videos was very different. All of the participants viewed the government commercials negatively, but for different reasons.

The negative assessments of the recovering heroin users came from their inability to fit the messages of the commercials into either of the dominant Discourses they used. From the point of view of their 'Hedonistic Discourse', the commercials were unrealistic. From the point of view of their 'Recovery Discourse', the commercials for the most part failed to provide the notion of 'a second chance' which was so vital to their recovery. The video this group produced to portray their own perspective on drug use begins with a segment in which participants are interviewed about why they take drugs. In this section, 'Hedonistic Discourse' is dominant, with interviewees focusing on 'practical' reasons for taking drugs like 'losing weight', being able to deal more effectively with the 'pressures of life' and 'fitting in' with particular groups. In the second part of the film, various scenes reminiscent of the 'decline' segment of their 'recovery stories' are portrayed:

purse snatching, a boy breaking up with his girlfriend, a boy being thrown out of his flat by his mother, a man picking through a rubbish bin, and finally, a shot of a coffin. In the final section of the film, the very same scenes are shown, only this time *in reverse*, ending with the slogan, 'Life *has* a take two' (sang1 ming6 jau5 'take two') itself a 'reversal' of a popular government anti-drug slogan.

The participants in the second group similarly gave negative appraisals of the commercials, emphasizing how different they were from their own experiences with drugs. Those participants who employed the 'Hedonistic Discourse' were particularly critical, and there was even a sense in which the commercials seemed to strengthen their 'Hedonistic Discourse' rather than weaken it. First, the elements in the commercials that were seen to be inconsistent with their real life experience became opportunities for participants to offer detailed critiques and thus further associate drug use with 'expertise'. Second, elements in the commercials using 'special effects' to portray the effects of drugs were seen as 'attractive' rather than 'unattractive'. Finally, the rhetorical technique of 'challenging' viewers with questions like 'Do you still want to play?' had the effect of strengthening viewers' resolve to assert the legitimacy of their own Discourse.

Because they could not agree on a single theme or story to represent their conflicting attitudes towards drugs, the participant's of this group decided to make two films, one portraying the girls' experience of 'getting high' in a small park near the housing estate where they lived, and the other portraying a memory the boy had of running from a taxi without paying the fare because he had spent all of his money on heroin. Of all of the three groups, the films produced by this group had the least traditional structures. Rather than presenting a 'message' or 'lesson' as the government

commercials did, these participants expressed the desire to depict their 'experience' in a realistic way so that viewers could understand the 'feelings' they associated with drug use. The girls' film was a kind of 'slice of life' in which two of the girls were shown taking drugs, laughing, singing and joking. The boy's film had a clearer narrative consisting of several episodes. However, he chose to edit them so that 'bits' of all the episodes were mixed randomly in a way he felt more accurately expressed his own thought process when he remembered the incident.

The third group, consisting of non-drug users, gave the most negative assessments of the government commercials but for different reasons. Their criticisms focused on what they saw as the lack of artistry of the commercial's techniques and the lack of clarity of their messages. Consistent with their fascination with the 'technical' aspects of drug taking and their concern with the 'artistry' (or lack thereof) of the government commercials, the film these participants produced was, among all the groups, the most technically sophisticated and 'literary'. It begins with a segment shot in a deserted underground railway station from the point of view of the main character, a girl who is trying to give up drugs. The camera moves slowly through the station, and then the scene shifts to a stairway in the girl's housing estate where she witnesses an image of 'herself' taking drugs. In this segment, accompanied by electric guitar music, special editing techniques are used to intermix close-ups of the 'drug taking self' and full body shots of the 'non-drug-taking self'. The final segment again shows a train passing in slow motion through the underground railway station. According to the participants, the shots in the railway station represented the isolation and relentless 'craving' they associate with addiction, and the shots in the stairway represented the 'allure' of drug use.

The 'Contradictory Discourse' observed in the interaction of this group is reflected in the ambiguous message of their film. On the one hand it portrays the 'loneliness' and anxiety they associate with the state of 'addiction'. On the other hand, it romanticizes this state through a seductive portrayal of the 'drug-taking self' smiling and slowly releasing smoke from her mouth. The image of drug use portrayed is both frightening and fascinating.

Conclusions

It should be stressed that the negative assessments of the commercials by the participants in this study does *not* indicate that government anti-drug messages are 'ineffective'. Such a conclusion would not only be unwarranted from the results of a small qualitative study, it would also violate the central theoretical position of the researchers: that how effective or ineffective media messages are depends not just on the messages themselves but on the kinds of Discourses viewers bring to them when they interpret them. At the same time, however, producers of such messages should take note of the possibilities that their messages might not just fail to have the effects they wish them to, but have opposite or detrimental effects. For recovering addicts, for example, overly pessimistic portrayals of the consequences of drug use and slogans like 'Drug users are losers' could actually work against the cultivation of 'hope' and 'self-esteem' needed for successful recovery. For young people whose 'Hedonistic Discourse' is an important part of their social identity, such messages may serve to strengthen their need to assert the legitimacy of this Discourse. If anything, this study points to the difficulties in producing 'generic' anti-drug media messages suitable for a wide range of young people who employ a wide range of Discourses to talk about drugs, and suggests that

more direct interventions like outreach programs and peer-education might be more appropriate.

The most positive results of this study were the effects the exercise had on the participants themselves. In debriefing sessions after the course, participants spoke of the increased confidence they gained from mastering the techniques of video production and seeing their projects move from the stage of 'mere ideas' to actual finished products. They also related how the experience had given them a unique way to reflect upon their own drug use and the consequences it had on their lives. This was particularly clear in the second group in which the girls, who were 'novice' drug users, began to question their positive assumptions about drug use through interaction with the boy.

The most consistent theme across all of the Discourses employed by the three groups was the very human need for their 'expertise' and the 'legitimacy' of their own experiences to be recognized. Structured group activities like the one employed in this project in which clients are given the means to 'talk back' to authoritative Discourses may provide them an opportunity to both demonstrate their 'expertise' about drugs and to begin to question their need to assert this 'expertise' in less appropriate ways.

**Appendix 1
Participants**

Age	Sex	Education/ Occupation	Age of first drug use	Duration of drug use	Drugs Used
Group One					
18	M	F.3/ unemployed	14	5 years	heroin, marijuana, 'ice', codeine (cough medicine)
19	M	F.2/ unemployed	12	6 years	heroin, amphetamines, codeine (cough medicine), solvents, flunitranze pam, romilar
19	M	F.1/ restaurant worker	15	4 years	heroin, marijuana, 'ice'
20	M	F.3/ construction worker	16	4 years	heroin, 'ice'
21	M	F.3/ unemployed	16	5 years	heroin, marijuana, codeine (cough medicine), hallucinogens
21	M	F.3/ messenger	14	6 years	heroin. misc. pills
28	M	F.5/ shipping clerk	19	8 years	heroin, amphetamines, LSD, 'ecstasy', marijuana, hashish, cocaine, codeine (cough medicine), tranquilizers, opium
Group Two					
14	F	F.2/ student	13	1 year	marijuana, 'ecstasy', 'ice', romilar, cocaine, codeine (cough medicine)
14	F	F.2/ student	13	1 year	marijuana, 'ecstasy', 'ice', romilar, cocaine, codeine (cough medicine)
17	F	F.2/ unemployed	13	5 years	marijuana, romilar, codeine (cough medicine)
18	M	F.1/ manual worker	13	5 years	heroin, marijuana, 'ice', codeine (cough medicine)
Group Three					
18	M	F.5/ student	18	> 1year	'ice' (1x)
18	M	F.5/ waiter	NA	NA	NA
19	M	F.7/ student	NA	NA	NA
20	M	F.5/ unemployed	NA	NA	NA
21	M	F.7/ construction worker	18	3 years	marijuana (infrequent)

Appendix 2

Course Syllabus

Session	Aim	Life Skills	Technical Skills
1	Building interest in using video camera Exploring issues of identity Setting group boundaries	Exercise: 'I' identity	Elementary principles of camera use Framing
2	Building trust among group Exploring drug history Exploring the effects of drugs on participants' lives	Exercise: Drug Map, Diaries	Camera work
3	Exploring reasons for taking drugs Understanding peer influence	Exercise: Debate (advantages and disadvantages of taking drugs), Role-playing high-risk situations	Lens, angle and framing
4	Building confidence and creativity	Drama workshop with instructors from local youth drama group	
5	Practicing filming techniques	Cooperation, sharing leadership roles	Free filming
6	Editing	Reflection on cooperation and sharing leadership roles	Editing materials from previous session, adding sound effects
7	Exploring participants' responses to government anti-drug API's Exploring what they want to tell people regarding their feelings/attitudes about drugs	Focus group discussion	Brainstorming for story board
8	Filming		
9	Editing		
10	Reviewing finished product and feedback		

¹ Central Registry of Drug Abuse. 1994 Survey to assess public awareness of anti-drug activities. Hong Kong: Narcotics Division, Government Secretariat, Hong Kong Government; 1994.

² Gee, J.P. *Social linguistics and literacies* (2nd edition). London: Taylor & Francis; 1996.

³ Davies, J.B. *Drugspeak: The analysis of drug discourse*. Amsterdam: Harwood; 1997.

⁴ Cameron, D. 'Respect, please!': Investigating race, power and language. In: Cameron, C., Frazer, E., Harvey, P. Rampton, M.B.H., & Richardson, K. editors. *Researching language: issues of power and method*. London: Routledge. 1992. pp. 113-138.

⁵ Philo, G. Getting the message: Audience research in the Glasgow University Media Group. In: Eldridge, J. editor. *Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power*. London: Routledge. 1993. pp. 253-270.