Drug Users as Social Change Agents: Example of Austria

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INTRODUCTION

Austria is a changing society. In the sixties, Austria had a population of about 6 million. After the fall of the “Iron Curtain,” a dramatic change started. Today, Austria is a country with 8.4 million people. Out of them, 1.2 million were born in foreign countries. Vienna is the capital with about 1.8 million inhabitants; out of them, about 450,000 are foreigners. Since the sixties, Austria and Vienna have an increasing problem with drug addicts and drug dealers.

DRUG SCENARIO IN AUSTRIA

It has to be understood that the history of human beings was accompanied by drug use and misuse. Alcohol, opium, cannabis, and other drugs were always part of human nature and life. Austrians have a long tradition of misusing alcohol. It is estimated that about 300,000 of the population have problems with alcohol. About 80,000 are addicted to gambling and about 100,000 are addicted to illegal drugs, 30,000 of them are addicted to heroin or cocaine. The number of smokers and people addicted to medicaments is not well known, but can be estimated to be about a half a million; may be more. Half of Austrians who are addicted to illegal drugs live in Vienna.

THE POLICE AND JUSTICE STRATEGY

A double strategy has been used to handle the problem of the drug addiction since the 1970s. After the end of World War II, a special law against drugs was implemented in Austria. In 1912, drug control became a question of international law. The Austrian Drug Law was implemented into the law system in 1946. Since 1971, the Austrian drug law differentiates between drug dealers and users-consumers. In 1985, a double strategy was implemented: Punishment and therapy became equal cornerstones of the Austrian drug law in order to handle the problem of drug consumption. In 2003, a step backward was taken in Austria. We returned to the concept of law and order, which meant more punishment, less treatment, stricter rules for consumers, and abolishing of the Juvenile Court, but not of the Juvenile law. These changes did not mean less crime. The level of crime is still very high. In 2004, we reached the highest level, with about 650,000 offenses; in 2011, we have experienced about 530,000 offenses, registered by police and a crime clearance rate of about 40%.

OFFICIAL DATA OF AUSTRIA AND VIENNA

As it was mentioned earlier, drugs have been and are an integral part of humanity, of civilizations, of cultures, and of our daily lives. Therefore, questions arise about a drug addict’s role in society at large as well as more specifically in his or her society. Is he crazy? Is she mad? Is s/he ill? Historically, drug addiction was understood as being a “moral defect.” Because of experiences during World Wars I and II, it was learned that drug addiction has to be recognized as being a cross-relationship between personality, frame conditions, and effects of the substances being used in whatever ways, patterns, amounts, etc.

References


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THE “GREEN CIRCLE” EXPERIENCE

Leonidos Lemonis, PhD, medical chair of the treatment centre “Green Circle”3 ("Grüner Kreis", special hospital, Marienhof) in Austria, is the director of the largest private treatment centre with about 500 patients. The drug addicts treated in this program use heroin, cocaine, and all other illegal drugs. They are treated regularly for a period of about 18 months and longer. The ongoing consensus about the “causes” of substance abuse are mainly problems that users have with their daily life. Drug users are considered as being individuals who are not ready and able to handle their problems and develop an unstoppable pressure—a “craving” for substances. The success rate in freeing them from their addictions is normally between 40% and 50%. If an addicted person is willing to start treatment, a strict structure is offered supporting the treatment. Treatment is based on medical and psychotherapeutic measures. In this program, they also work and are active in sports. I asked him if the Green Circle uses addicts in education programs as social change agents. His answer was that the experiences were mixed. In the beginning, they, the staff, were very fond of teaching together with drug addicts. Later on, they experienced enormous problems. Some of the drug addicts could not stop their addiction and the outcome was that to be related to as being a teacher and later on to be treated as an addict was too much stress for patients. Therefore, the Green Circle stopped this program and does not use it any more.

POLICE EXPERIENCE

I asked the same question to an investigator of my former police department where I was chief for about 15 years. I visited chief inspector Josef Markl, working in Vienna in the main drug department, and he answered: “The Police Academy in Austria” asked me to set up teaching courses for advanced police officers of the middle and higher management level. I am teaching four to six times a year and preparing these lectures as I wanted to offer something special. I decided to invite former drug addicts to accompany me. I know a young lady, she is 33 years old now, and a rather elderly junky, who is over 40 years old now. They were willing to participate. My experiences are that police officers are very much impressed by the stories that the former drug addicts were telling them. The very direct experiences and original impressions of these people cannot be compared to teaching effects of myself. How they elaborate on the enormous pressure to get the drug, what they do just to experience the effect of 20 seconds, craving for the next heroin shot, all was incredible. All kinds of experiences were described with alcohol to “kill” their feelings after the big “shot”... all of this is unforgettable.

But the story of teaching together with former drug addicts ended abruptly. Markl told that this was a very sad and bad experience. Instead of convincing drug addicts to stop drug use, they experienced a completely contrary effect. Watching the lady, who is extremely beautiful and looks great, and the rather funny elderly junky, the effect was that young drug addicts now were convinced they can keep control of their own addiction all the time. This young lady and this elderly man have succeeded themselves and are now recovered. Because of this experience, chief inspector Markl stopped lecturing together with former drug addicts before young substance users.

CONCLUSION

Far-reaching conclusions are not to be drawn from two random tales of Vienna. These were mixed experiences by academics and practitioners working with drug users as social change agents. It did not help so much for drug users to work with young drug addicts. It did seem to be helpful with police officers having no experience in this field. Questions about active drug users as actual or potential social change agents are not yes or no questions. There are complex dimensions and conditions to consider. For example, “matching” the user with the task and role may be a reasonable conclusion to be derived from the two random tales of Vienna.

THE AUTHOR


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3 www.gruenerkreis.at