5 Distributing and Understanding Drugs

In the analysis of why and how adolescents use drugs it is clear that they rely on an elaborate belief system about the immediate and long-term effects of different types of drugs and that drug-taking implies social rituals for predicting and modifying such effects. In this chapter we will review adolescents' knowledge and beliefs about drug use. First, however, we will describe how they obtain the drugs they use. In reviewing the extensive discussions of drug-related behaviour which the subjects provided we found not only rich descriptions of their folk pharmacology but also a surprising omission: there were very few references to the difficulty of obtaining drugs or to fear of arrest when purchasing drugs. The process of obtaining drugs was taken for granted as a routine transaction which involved, for almost all purchasers, contact only with people they knew well, at least by reputation.

Because drug sale and possession laws exist and are enforced, the operation of the 'drug market' is necessarily secret, that is, official observers can only estimate volume, price and overhead on the basis of that sample of transactions which is observed by law enforcement agents in some way. The media provide fragmentary evidence of the magnitude and organization of this market as depicted by those charged with controlling drug distribution. For example, a recent television public service announcement aimed at young people claimed that 'you could buy a new car with the money spent annually by the average drug user'. The highly publicized trial of John Delorean emphasized the millions of dollars to be made from cocaine sales. Particularly vicious crimes, such as the murder of an entire family in New York City, are attributed to the ruthlessness of drug dealers in pursuing profits. Those who distribute drugs to consumers
are depicted as greedy, amoral and manipulative—caught in a
world of intrigue and danger. The drug peddler, anxious to
increase profits (and often to feed his or her own drug habit) is
described as an important source of new drugs in a community, and as actively recruiting and initiating new users.

The actual distribution of drugs among the junior high
school and high school age youth in the community we
studied, however, involves a completely different scale of sales
and profits and is based on a very different system of values
from that depicted in news reports and public service an-
nouncements. Adults sell directly to only a small proportion
of adolescent drug users. As we shall see, the potential profit
on each transaction is small and the process of locating
customers is time-consuming. While selling drugs is available
to adolescents as a way of making relatively large sums of
money, those who do sell in fact often limit their profits; their
customers are also their friends, acquaintances or friends of
friends. The youths involved in drug distribution also make it
clear that the illegality of drug sales makes them not only
profitable but also offers an opportunity to display valued
skills; these include specialized knowledge, self-control, pru-
dence and thrift. The seller’s reputation for fairness, generos-
ity and reliability is enhanced by the transaction’s meeting
non-economic criteria for exchange which are widely agreed
upon.

In order to understand how drugs are actually distributed
in adolescent worlds, it is important to remember that the
adolescent economy is one in which basic needs are still met by
parents. For most of those who are still in school, food, shelter
and basic clothing are provided; additional money is needed
for lunches, movies, designer jeans, make-up and record
albums. For those who use drugs occasionally and socially,
beer and marijuana money is also required. An allowance or
part-time job at minimum wage may meet these additional
expenses and even permit saving for a used car or stereo
equipment—relatively expensive items in the budgets of those
in the study. The resources of either very privileged or very
poor youth will be different, but they will be evaluated in
terms of this standard.

As they become older, adolescents’ need for money in-
creases and their opportunities for getting what they need