How Adolescents Use Drugs

We have seen that the answers to the question of why adolescents use drugs vary in terms of the patterns of use; the reasons they themselves give are both social, in the case of boredom and custom, and individual, in the case of depression and self-control. Listening to adolescents talk about their drug use and their observations of others' use immediately suggests the importance of understanding how drugs are used, that is, the social routines which define appropriate drug use and the instances in which drugs are used primarily to achieve some desired physiological change in the user.

Most lives consist of regular routines that are occasionally interrupted by special events. Objects and activities that make up those routines come to have an unproblematic, taken-for-granted character about them even as they contribute to the perpetuation of the routines. This fairly static pattern typically continues until macro social conditions alter it. In the case of adolescents, the beginning and end of a set of routines usually correspond to entrance and exit from the adolescent period of the particular society.

The content of a group's everyday routines is determined by the resources available to the group, which are concomitants of the group's place in society. Interruptions of these routines are sometimes the result of creative manipulation of these resources by members of the group, but more often consist simply of other, less ubiquitous routines.

This chapter is an analysis of the thousand or so events reported by the subjects in which drug use occurred. We have sought distinctions made by the adolescents themselves between ordinary drug use and use for special purposes or occasions. In so doing, we discovered that this distinction is secondary, the primary division of drug-use events being
recreational versus instrumental use. In short, adolescents take drugs as part of their leisure activities together, and these activities may be routine or special; and adolescents take drugs in order to achieve goals such as staying awake all night, some of these uses being routine, others out of the ordinary.

ROUTINE RECREATIONAL USE

'Everybody's getting high', Kirk says. 'Everybody. I mean, it's like an everyday, that's so normal it's pathetic. Everybody just gets high. It's nothing new, it's nothing to be big about. It's no big thing.' Marijuana use, it must be remembered, has been a frequent activity among American youths for a decade. To many young people² it is an insignificant part of everyday life: their friends do it, their siblings do it, and in most cases their parents do it or have done it. 'I like doing it, but I don't think of it as like, a drug', Michael explains, 'I don't think of dope as a drug. I think of like, speed and acid and all that stuff as drugs. I don't think of dope as drugs though... I think of it on the same lines as beer. To tell you the truth, it's just a little more expensive.'

By far the most common type of drug use by the subjects is marijuana-smoking as a component of hanging out.

Ben: It was Longridge Lake or something, and we just got like a whole bunch of beer, and we went out there and built a fire, and went swimming and just hung around, you know, cooked out and stuff like that, That was an all right time. We went out to a restaurant, you know, and we, were pretty drunk, and we saw these girls and, you know, we said, you know, we're camping, and they came over, and there was six of them, and they spent the night, and that was probably, you know,

Q: Did they just hang out, or did they sleep with you guys or what?

Ben: Yeah, they slept with us.

Q: Who was there, you and who else?

Ben: Well, let's see. Ned, Eric, ah, Karl, his brother Ralph, ah Albert and his girlfriend Irene, this girl named Arlene, Oscar, ah Van, and that was really about it.