A Behavior Profile of Polydrug Abusers

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Polydrug abusers have been thought to present with characteristic behavior profiles and to suffer from brain damage. In this study, an attempt was made to delineate the behavior characteristics of polydrug abusers using the Personality Inventory developed by Bear and Fedio for temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). In addition to a group of normal youths, a contrast group comparable to the polydrug abusers in psychiatric history, education, socioeconomic status, and family history was employed. Results revealed that for almost all traits the scores of polydrug abusers were the most extreme, while those of the controls the least, with the scores of the contrast group falling in between. The inventory correctly classified 87% of the experimental, 81% of the control, and 71% of the contrast group. The profile of personality traits that identified the polydrug abusers considerably overlapped with the profile of TLEs reported by Bear and Fedio, although the significance of the overlap is at present unclear. Future research is suggested to examine a possible limbic system involvement in polydrug abuse.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on the personality characteristics of drug and alcohol abusers, using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), converge in suggesting that their personality profiles show deviations on the depression, psychopathic deviance, psychasthenia and schizophrenia scales (Bartzins et al., 1971; Hill et al., 1960; Smith et al., 1966; Staus et al., 1977; Svanum and Dallas, 1981). The continued abuse of drugs has also raised speculation that at least some abusers may develop secondary brain damage. Research in this area has been contradictory with the best data relating to alcohol abuse (Grant and Mohns, 1975; Tarter, 1975). One study that has made a significant contribution to the literature on organic impairment and polydrug abuse is that of Grant et al. (1978). Studying 151 polydrug abusers in eight different programs, these investigators found difficulties in the subjects' abstracting abilities and in their perceptual motor skills, suggesting cerebral involvement. When they considered the subgroup of Central Nervous System (CNS) depressant abusers, they found a positive correlation between CNS depressant abusers and cerebral deficit. Much as with previous studies, the MMPI profiles of the subjects in the Grant et al. sample showed peaks on the depression, psychasthenia, schizophrenia, hypomania, and psychopathic personality scales. In 1980, Bergman et al. studied the association between CNS depressants and cerebral impairment. In agreement with Grant et al. (1978), they showed that these drugs may be associated with impaired abstracting ability, memory, and perceptual skills.

Our clinical work with multiple-drug users suggested a possible resemblance in their presenting characteristics, and in the interictal behavior and characteristics reported by Bear and Fedio (1977) for their temporal lobe epileptics (TLE). Furthermore, some of our patients were diagnosed as TLE after the onset of polydrug abuse. In their study, Bear and Fedio employed a behavior profile, called the “Personal Inventory,” which apparently discriminated a range of behaviors that characterized TLEs during the interictal period. This 90-item, true–false questionnaire, reducible to 18 traits or scales, was extremely useful in classifying TLE. A subsequent adaptation of it was also shown to be sensitive in discriminating between TLEs and other epileptics, schizophrenics, primary affectively disordered, and aggressive character-disordered individuals (Bear et al., 1982).

Although we were not explicitly interested in speculating on possible neurological involvement, particularly of the limbic system and drug abuse, the Bear and Fedio profile appeared particularly promising to us. This is because the MMPI, which has hitherto been employed with drug abusers, was not intended to describe specific behavioral characteristics in groups of individuals such as the drug abusers. It is instead used as a general personali-