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Treating antisocial behavior: A context for substance abuse prevention

Paul S. Strand*

*Department of Psychology, Washington State University, 2710 University Drive,
Richland, WA 99352, USA*

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Abstract

A large body of literature illustrates an association between antisocial behavior and substance abuse. In the present paper, this association is reviewed from a behavioral-economic standpoint. It is suggested that childhood antisocial behavior is a behavioral complement of substance abuse, and that prosocial behavior is a substitute for substance abuse. Based on this formulation, efforts to reduce or prevent antisocial behavior may be conceptualized as prevention programs for substance abuse. Four empirically supported approaches for the treatment of antisocial behavior are reviewed with respect to their promise for preventing and treating substance abuse. Taken together, they suggest that successful interventions for substance abuse may occur at various points over the course of development, beginning in infancy and extending into adolescence. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

You become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in any other direction. Junk wins by default. (Burroughs, 1977, p. xv)

Several authors have identified a contradictory or paradoxical aspect of addiction (Heyman, 1996; Herrnstein & Prelec, 1992). It is that the behavior of addicts is characterized as being “out of control” or “impulsive,” but at the same time calculated and planful. Similarly, addicted individuals oftentimes proclaim a desire to rid themselves of substance use yet may go to extraordinary lengths to engage in it. These inconsis-

* Tel.: +1-509-372-7177; fax: +1-509-372-7100.

E-mail address: pstrand@tricity.wsu.edu (P.S. Strand).

encies—between what individuals say they want and their actual behavior—have been explained in terms of the *matching law* (Herrnstein & Prelec, 1992; Heyman, 1996). In short, the matching law is a theory of choice stating that behavior is frequently determined by relative value functions rather than overall value functions (Herrnstein, 1974, 1997). That is, while behavior is influenced by both immediate reinforcement contingencies (i.e., the pleasures of immediate gratification) and more delayed contingencies (i.e., the pleasures of larger later rewards), the latter tend to be discounted (Green, Fry, & Myerson, 1994; Vuchinich & Simpson, 1999). Therefore, despite the fact that long-term goals may involve abstaining from substance use or some other addictive activity, the matching law illustrates that the immediate rewards for imbibing may overwhelm our capacity to act in accordance with our long-term ambitions.

The matching law formulation of substance abuse highlights the interrelationship between the value functions for substitutable activities (i.e., drinking alcohol versus not drinking alcohol). Unlike economic formulations that assume individuals allocate behavior so as to maximize rewards, the matching law formulation suggests conditions under which individuals fail to maximize outcomes (Rachlin, 1995). The utility of this formulation for understanding substance abuse lies in the fact that it can explain choices that appear to both the addict and to others as self destructive and unreasonable. The details of this formulation will be discussed more completely below. In addition to having *substitutes*, however, activities also have *complements*. The presence of complements increases the value of some activity, thereby increasing its rate and likelihood of occurrence. The present paper explores antisocial behavior as a complement for substance abuse and prosocial behavior as a substitute for substance abuse. The focus is on why the emergence of antisocial behavior in children sets the stage for substance abuse, and how this may inform treatment.¹

The present paper is organized into four sections. A recently proposed theory of substance abuse based on matching theory is reviewed and recognized as incomplete with respect to explaining substance abuse. An expanded conceptualization, based also on matching theory, is proposed. This conceptualization is organized around the notion that many cases of substance abuse and addiction emerge from early forms of antisocial behavior. According to this perspective, the emergence of antisocial behavior is associated with increased rewards for substance use relative to rewards available for alternatives to substance use. This outcome is the result of at least two processes inherent in the development of conduct disorder: (1) the emergence of social skills deficits and (2) a tendency to overly discount delayed and probabilistic rewards. Both of these outcomes reduce the rewards obtained for activities that are substitutes for substance use. In the final sections of this paper, a developmentally informed framework is presented for prevention and treatment intervention based on the complementary relationship between antisocial behavior and substance abuse.

¹ Throughout this paper, the term substance abuse is used to refer to both substance abuse and substance dependence disorders defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

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