Nainita Madurai

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The Effects of Latin American Drug Culture on Adolescence

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Introduction:

The life-stage of adolescence is a topic that has interested anthropologists for decades. The anthropology of adolescence studies and attempts to identify cross-cultural aspects and characteristics of this specific and unique life-stage. Traditionally, adolescence is defined as the period starting at the point of puberty and ending when there is an assumption of full adult roles. Across cultures, these full adult roles can be different and the length of adolescence may vary depending on cultural and societal practices. Adolescence is known to be a life-stage during which there is an increase in risk-taking; this is marked as a cross-cultural occurrence. The focus of this paper is on adolescents in Latin America and the affects of the drug culture on the length of adolescence. One theory could be that adolescence is prolonged, while another could be that adolescence is curtailed, due to the infamous Latin American drug trade and the subsequent gang violence.

Illicit drug-use and its related activities have become a way of life for those who engage in its dealings. Latin America is notorious for its widespread drug trade that consists of numerous drug cartels. Drug cartels are organized crime units, essentially a system of gangs that control, regulate, and encourage drug trafficking operations. The high rates of homicide and gang violence are mostly attributed to rivalries between drug cartels within and among the nations of Latin America. The countries in which the most extensive drug cartels exist are Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil. The adolescents of Latin America make up the largest group of people involved in this permeating drug culture.

The drug cartels are highly integrated into the societies and mostly affect the poorer sections of the cities in which they exist. Another general aspect of Latin American society that is important to know is that the majority of populations live in the city; there is not really a suburban life like in the United States. In addition, a large portion of the population that lives in the city lives in poverty. Even more, of those who live in poverty, a large percentage are in fact adolescents and children.

The purpose of this essay is to provide evidence to support the theory that Latin American adolescence is in fact shortened by the effects of the drug culture. There are three main topics to be discussed to explain why adolescence is curtailed. The first is the reason why adolescents are more prone to engage in illegal substance-use in a biological and neurological sense. The second studies the specific Latin American drug use, how youths contribute to the drug trade, and how the drug trade affects them. The last topic is how the drug culture affects childhood in Latin America and its corresponding affects on adolescence.

Topic 1:

The increase in risk-taking in adolescence is not random and is not solely due to cultural practices; this marked amplification of risk-taking behavior has also been linked to neurological alterations. It should be pointed out that this increase in risk-taking does not necessarily reflect that adolescents are expressing a desire to die. On the contrary, engaging in risky activities helps them to understand the value of their life and to repel the idea that their lives are insignificant. Essentially, adolescence is a time for many individuals to find and give meaning to life before adulthood.

The neurological alterations that take place have behavioral correlates, and are thus called neurobehavioral changes. The primary neurological changes that occur during adolescence include the relative decline in size of the prefrontal cortex, the increase of connections between nerve cells in the brain, and the fluctuation of the levels of input of dopamine to the limbic brain regions and the prefrontal cortex.

The prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain that controls the abilities to determine the difference between good and bad, to contemplate future consequences of activities, to work toward a defined goal, to predict outcomes, and to suppress desires to partake in activities that are socially-unacceptable. Its function explains why the decline in this region of the brain increases participation in high-risk and other possibly detrimental activities, such as recreational drug use.

The limbic brain regions include the hypothalamus, amygdala, hippocampus, and nucleus accumbens. The hypothalamus secretes hormones that regulate functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, and sexual arousal. The amygdala is involved in relaying information to the prefrontal cortex dealing with positively or negatively significant stimuli. The hippocampus is mainly required for the formation of long-term memories. The nucleus accumbens is involved in addictions and feelings associated with sexual arousal and recreational drugs. The limbic system is highly affected by dopamine levels. This is why increased levels of dopamine to this system increase the desire for novel, external stimuli and the importance of social reinforcement. Emotions, especially strong ones such as anger, fear, and lust, become stronger and cause more defined actions and reactions.

These changes in adolescent brains and behaviors have been specifically linked to the use of recreational drugs in many regions of the world. In Latin America, however, these drugs are not always just recreational; they are aspects of the Latin American adolescent identity that are far more societal, cultural, political, and economical.

Topic 2:

The drug-trade and subsequent gang violence is a pervasive and impenetrable force in Latin American culture and society. Though not all countries in Latin America have a comprehensive drug culture, most of them have at least some form of it. As an example of how persistent and permeating drug trafficking is, even within some Latin American prisons where most men and women are incarcerated for drug-related charges, the drug trade is still present. The drug culture has largely been affected by the rapid urbanization and persistent poverty that occurred and is occurring in most Latin American countries. Other internal and external factors also contribute to the vastness of the drug culture, such as the availability of weapons, the persistent inequality in urban settings, the rising popularity of cocaine in the international drug market, the insufficiency of social services, and the constant political turmoil that plagues many Latin American nations.

The drug culture is mainly based on the sale of cocaine. The use of cocaine does in fact have traditional origins in Latin America. Cocaine is derived from the coca plant, which has habitually been used in Andean culture, the indigenous culture of the populations that lived in Andes mountain range. They had many uses for the coca plant that included medicinal and religious purposes. Coca is usually prepared and consumed as a chew or as tea (called *mate de coca*). Political leaders in Latin America, namely Evo Morales (President of Bolivia), are adamant about differentiating between the many traditional uses of the coca plant, which should be celebrated, and the use of cocaine to promote drug trafficking, which should be scorned and penalized. Cocaine is also a highly addictive drug; this ensures that once a drug cartel has a customer they remain a buyer for a very long time. On a macro-scale, perhaps it is the adolescents of the United States that are fueling the cocaine market to satisfy their need for external stimuli, novel experiences, and social acceptance.

With the intention of selling addictive cocaine and securing power within their sections of the city, the drug cartels thrive in Latin America. More often than not, these cartels have far more power than any police force. In the *favelas* of Brazil the police force is essentially controlled and corrupted by different drug cartels. Security cannot be guaranteed for anybody in these areas and the cities do not provide enough social services to help children and adolescents escape the influence of the drug cartels.

The prevalence of violence is an essential contributing factor to the curtailment of adolescence. As a region, Latin America has some of the highest rates of homicide in the world, and almost thirty percent of these homicides are committed by adolescents between the ages of ten and twenty. Likewise, the percentage of adolescent and child victims is also considerably high. The prevalence of violence is largely due to the fact that guns and other weaponry are easily accessible to the drug cartels. In most slums boys and young men carry guns as if they are toys; they use them often too. In addition to the everyday violence of gangs, gang wars and other wars between drug cartels cause an irreparable amount of bloodshed and destruction. These wars extend and involve innocent civilians as well. Many adolescents do not see past their sixteenth birthday.

On a cultural and traditional level, gang violence is also linked with the gender role of *machismo* in Latin American society. *Machismo* is the idea that men should show intense and almost excessive virility and masculinity. The *machismo* ideal encourages dominance and a thirst for power and control. The stronger, smarter, and more able a boy is, the higher he will be able to get in the hierarchy of the drug trade. Most gang leaders are relatively young ages and the thousands of boys and young men in the *favelas* (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil constitute an integral part of the drug trafficking system. Furthermore, the drug culture does not exclude young women and girls. A survey conducted in Colombia in 1992 concluded that over one quarter of the women involved in prostitution were between the ages of eleven and twenty. This appalling statistic portrays just one of the traumatizing conditions that adolescents are subject to in the slums of many Latin American cities.

Another problem with adolescents associating themselves with drug trafficking is that it is very difficult for a person to remove himself from a crime organization like the drug cartels once he or she gets involved. Firstly, many members of the cartels are addicted to the cocaine they sell and secondly, once a member is involved they learn about secret dealings that they literally have to take to the grave (and many do). There is very little trust among and within these cartels, so to become part of one you have to show loyalty. This means that many adolescents commit themselves to organizations in which they become trapped.

Contrary to the reasons that should correlate with neurobehavioral changes in their brain, many of these Latin American adolescents engage in the drug culture not for the novel experience, the external stimuli of drug addiction, or the social aspect of drug cartels, but rather out of necessity to make ends meet. For the impoverished adolescents, it has almost become a part of their culture to get involved in drug trafficking. For this reason, these youths experience very little of their adolescence. In most cultures, the existence of multiple options for adolescents results in the lengthening of adolescence, like in the United States. Conversely, the absence of choice for adolescents in Latin America shortens their adolescence.

The lack of choice is largely due to the fact that adolescents and children are marginalized by the various governments in Latin America. The marginalization of youths is a contributing factor to the prevalence of drug trafficking. Not enough government support is given to improve conditions for adolescents and children in the slums of cities, so they get involved with the drug trade.

Topic 3:

Childhood events often have an influential impact on adolescent development. The precursor ages right before adolescence are the most influential during later stages in life. Significant events that affect adolescent brain development are almost always traumatic or other severely negative events. These occurrences can alter and determine future behaviors, actions, and emotions (or lack thereof) during adolescence. For this reason, Latin American adolescence is highly influenced by its corresponding childhood.

Latin American childhood is immensely affected by the drug trade. Many children grow up as orphans or homeless because their parents have been killed or jailed due to the gang violence. In some Latin American cities such as La Paz, Bolivia, children are even imprisoned with their incarcerated parents to keep them off the streets. This practice also represents a Latin American ideal that stresses the importance of families; even when in prison a family must stay together. These prisons effectively model the world outside their walls and are essentially tiny, contained communities. However, being behind bars definitely does not stop these children from being exposed to the drug trade. It is even said that the finest cocaine in Bolivia is found in the San Pedro’s Prison in La Paz. Most children in prison still witness prostitution and violence (and sometimes are part of it) just like children on the streets.

Problematic occurrences such as these have a hardening and traumatizing effects on children. Without proper medical and psychological treatment or even the means to obtain these types of services, impoverished Latin American children go untreated for serious mental disorders. Of course, these mental disorders remain and are sometimes reinforced during adolescence.

Education is also a major issue that affects children. Most children do not finish even primary school because they must instead support their families. Parents often have no other choice but to encourage their children to get jobs and quit school. It is a matter of survival for both the family and the individual. This is how these children are raised, with principles that are followed for the purpose of protecting themselves and their families. The deprivation of education extends into adolescence as well. Even more students drop out as they get older. The lack of secondary education severely limits job opportunities in the recognized job market, so illegal occupations are constantly fed new supplies of employees.

Conclusion:

The problem of drug cartels in Latin America has severely limited adolescents there. However, globalization and the spread of information have increased humanitarian awareness of the detrimental effects of drug trafficking in Latin America. More and more movies, books, news stories and documentaries are picking up topics such as the drug trade and the plight of the people in Latin America. For example, the movie “City of God” (based on a true story) portrays the effects that the drug trade and gang violence has on childhood and adolescence in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. This increased awareness has no doubt also increased humanitarian aid to the region.

For those adolescents involved in the trade and the gangs, adolescence is short-lived; for some of them, life itself is short-lived. In Latin America, if an adolescent takes part in drug trafficking, he or she usually remains a part of it for the rest of his or her life. Getting involved in drug trafficking and the culture behind it is an escape from poverty for most adolescents. In their minds they only have two options: getting rich off of drug trafficking or accepting a life of constant impoverishment. This is unlike the situation in the United States, where illicit drug use and the drug trade are often used by adolescents as a means to escape the pressures of becoming an adult.

Latin American governments need to realize the importance of preserving the adolescent life-stage and the overall safety and wellbeing of adolescents. The marginalization of adolescents is incredibly detrimental to the development of the nations. Adolescents essentially make up the next generation of leaders and the situation in which they are raised is incredibly influential on the future of Latin American countries. From the evidence and information that has been introduced in this essay, humanitarians, sociologists and anthropologists can pinpoint specific causal factors that may help them eradicate some of the problems that exist in the drug trafficking of Latin America. Because the drug culture is so incredibly embedded in society it would be impossible to eradicate it completely. However, humanitarian aid and future anthropological studies should be prepared to determine what can be done to improve the conditions and environments so that the youths affected by drug trafficking in Latin America can truly experience adolescence.