

1-1-2003

Anomie or Alienation?: A Self-Exploration of the Roots of Substance Abuse

Buddi Osco

University of Massachusetts Boston

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture>



Part of the [Substance Abuse and Addiction Commons](#), and the [Theory, Knowledge and Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Osco, Buddi (2003) "Anomie or Alienation?: A Self-Exploration of the Roots of Substance Abuse," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 15.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol2/iss2/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.



Anomie or Alienation?: **A Self-Exploration of the** **Roots of Substance Abuse**

Buddi Osco

UMass Boston

Substance abuse is a serious problem for millions of citizens in the United States, and throughout the world. Everyday, across the globe, individuals of different races, ethnicities, religions, cultures, and social classes struggle with the disease of drug addiction. Many people lay the blame for these problems on the individuals themselves, labeling them as criminals, deviants, or persons of weak moral character. Perhaps they even cite bad parenting, or other such factors. But what if the true source of the problem was greater? What if the problem lies not in the individual or their family at all, but in society as a whole? Or, rather, what if the problem lies in the individual's lack of a connection to the rest of society?

In this paper, I will attempt to apply Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie and Karl Marx's theory of alienation to the problem of substance abuse, using my own life experiences to illuminate the subject. Although I do not consider myself to be a substance abuser, I do feel that I am qualified to serve as the primary example because I use marijuana on an almost daily basis. I do not consider my marijuana-us-

ing behavior to be deviant; however, marijuana and its usage have been deemed illegal and, thus, unacceptable behavior in the society in which I live. That said, contrary to my personal beliefs, I do technically fit the societal label of "substance abuser."

Anomie is a social condition characterized by instability, the breakdown of social norms, institutional disorganization, and a separation between socially valid goals and available means for achieving them. It also refers to the psychological condition of futility, anxiety, and amorality afflicting individuals who live under such conditions. As Durkheim wrote in *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, "no living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means" (1951:246). Put another way, what Durkheim meant was that man has certain expectations for his life. If these expectations are not met by society, then this will result in the individual's feeling alone and detached from the rest of society. Furthermore, Durkheim said that individual's natural expectations are unlimited. It is society's purpose to lay down the law. As Durkheim wrote, "[society] alone has the power necessary to stipulate the law and set the point beyond which the passions must not go" (249). That is to say, it is society that must regulate people's needs and set limitations. If society tells us what goals we are capable of achieving and we are then unable to reach those goals, then a feeling of anomie is the result.

In modern society we are told that human potential is almost limitless. In the United States particularly we know of this belief as the "American Dream." Since childhood we are told that we can achieve any and all of our dreams as long as we put in the effort. But with passage into adulthood, we quickly learn that it is not hard work alone that fulfills our expectations. There are other factors beyond our initial control, such as race, economic standing, and social class, which determine our place

in life.

I come from a working-class family. My mother was raised in the rural Ireland. She lived in poverty, and came to America in search of a better life. My father was born and raised in the United States. He too lived in poverty as a child in the housing projects of Charlestown, MA. In a sense, they achieved the “American Dream,” as they both graduated to a higher social and economic class. Likewise, they did so through their own hard work and merit, and without the assistance of a college education. As a teenager, seeing, learning, and realizing what my parents had achieved through their own persistence and valiant efforts, I only assumed that I too would someday do as they had done. Seeing as I had even more resources at my disposal than my predecessors, I naturally dreamed of surpassing the achievements of my own parents socially and economically. Instead, I have found that a society very much unlike the one that I was led to believe existed. I have discovered a world in which the “American Dream” is merely a pipe dream.

Unlike my parents, I was not raised in poverty. I was born and raised in West Roxbury, a middle-class neighborhood of Boston. My parents were wealthy enough to be able to send me to a parochial middle school. I attended the prestigious Boston Latin Academy High School, a public preparatory school in Dorchester, MA. I had always assumed that such schooling would eventually lead me to an equally prestigious college career. Instead, because of a lack of financial means, I was led to the University of Massachusetts in Boston—a commuter university characterized by my high school guidance counselor as a “safety school” to which one applies in the event one is not accepted to a better one.

At first, this turn of events did not subdue me. I still had very high hopes for my future. I wanted to major in communications with a focus on film or radio. I was disappointed to find that the university

curriculum did not contain either field of study. But, nevertheless, I continued on with my pursuit of higher knowledge. In the back of my mind, I thought that, perhaps, eventually I could transfer to a different institution that would have the fields that I truly yearned to study. Obviously, this would never happen. Due to financial constraints, I was forced to change my future plans. I was forced to mold my dreams into something more realistic. Realistic in the sense that it was more attainable for someone of my social and economic stature. After three years at the university, I came to the sad realization that I was stuck in a dire situation. As Durkheim wrote, “reality seems valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations; reality is therefore abandoned ...” (256). I discerned that because of circumstances beyond my control I would never achieve my life goals. And, more so, I realized that reaching the goals that I had so desperately strived for was nearly impossible in the first place—that, realistically, the very society that had peddled the idea of the “American Dream” to me in the first place was what made achieving it so difficult.

Although I was unaware at the time, what I was feeling was anomie. The situation did not make sense to me. I felt like I had been lied to by society. Just as Durkheim had described, there was a separation between socially valid goals and available means for achieving them. Psychologically, I was filled with anxiety and a feeling of futility because, as Durkheim wrote, “to pursue a goal, which is by definition, unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness” (248). And this is exactly where I found myself.

But the question is, did this condition of anomie contribute to my substance abuse? The answer, in my opinion, would be a resounding yes. Before this occasion, I would classify my marijuana use as strictly social. It was only after coming to the realization that my life was almost predeter-

mined that I began using it on a much more frequent basis. And the reason that I was using it on an almost daily basis was to tide the feelings of anxiety. Without the distraction of marijuana, I would uncontrollably dwell on my feelings of helplessness. I needed something outside of my being to more or less forget, if only for a fleeting moment of time, my current state. In essence, I began to use marijuana more often because it was depressing to dwell on the fact that I was stuck in a dead-end situation. Marijuana became an escape from the everyday monotony that my life had become, and, in my mind, would surely remain.

Alienation is another social condition much like anomie, but which is a result of the division of labor in modern society. According to Marx, meaningful labor is what makes us human. That is to say that in order for our lives to be meaningful, we must have a fulfilling job in society. We must have a place in the grand scheme of things in order for us to feel like a member of society. Hence, the importance of labor. In essence, without a job we are useless. But more than that, our job must be something important to us. Our labor must make us feel as if we are contributing to society. Without this meaningfulness, we are left feeling outside of ourselves and, thus, outside of society as a whole.

In regards to my own life, I will use my current employment at a Barnes & Noble bookstore as the primary example. Before working at Barnes & Noble, I had had several other jobs in the retail industry. However, my past experiences had all felt as if I was simply pushing the products of the company. I did not connect with the merchandise, nor with the business. Furthermore, I had no desire to connect with either one. When I first began working at Barnes & Noble, though, I thought of it as a job in which I would be able to contribute to society. By this, I mean, that I would at least be promoting something that could potentially expand the knowledge of those who fre-

quented the establishment. Although I would not actually produce any of the books that were to be sold, in my mind, just by selling the products I was still part of something that was productive to the general public. Moreover, I only assumed that the company would hold this same attitude, in at least some sense. Bear in mind that I did not expect to waltz into a utopia. But I did believe that they would show some semblance of a company that was, in some small way, dispensing knowledge to those who were thirsty for it. However, after working there for only a short time I was quickly exposed to a completely different attitude.

I found a business that was no different than any of those that I had been employed by in the past. Barnes & Noble is, in reality, nothing more than a multi-million dollar corporation that is simply interested in making money. They do not view their position as one in which they could possibly better society. Just like any other business in corporate America, they bow down to the almighty dollar. They view their products as just that. They are not contributing to society by providing books to the public. Instead, they are selling a product for profit. Nothing more, and nothing less. And, as such, I as an employee am viewed as nothing more than a possible commodity or expense. Just as Marx's theory of alienation had described, my employers have distorted my personal view of my labor. As Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*, "... as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest ... man's own deed becomes an alien power to opposed to him ..." (53). This "alien power" is very much how I have now come to view my job. I no longer believe that I am contributing to society. I feel no connection to my labor. There is no enjoyment to be had at my work, and there is no connection to be felt. It has simply become a means to an end. I go to work in order to earn money. There is no other way of evaluating the situation be-

cause that is the way that it is presented to me.

Furthermore, just as Marx's theory states, my job is also a competition between my fellow employees and myself. If the business is not being run well, we compete for the opportunity to serve the company—because, of course, when the company is not making money then it must cut costs and we, the employees, are seen as the primary expense. Hence, it is our opportunity to labor that is the first to be cut back. As a result, I view the other employees as an “alien power” as well. Sadly, I cannot think of them as friends or colleagues. In my mind, they are no better than the company for which we are employed. They are almost an extension of the company's mentality itself.

But do these feelings of alienation contribute to my drug abuse? I would have to respond negatively to this idea. My conflicted feelings toward my job and my employers do not seem to contribute to my marijuana use at all. Instead, my reaction to this alienation results in a rebellion toward my work that takes place in other forms. For example, when feeling no connection to my work, I might react by not giving much of an effort while working. Or I might react by showing up late, leaving early, taking overly long breaks, or perhaps taking more breaks than I am allowed. In the most deviant case, I might steal a book every so often. In essence, yes, the feelings of alienation do lead to deviant behavior on my part, but the deviant behavior always manifests itself in the form of rebellion against the company. The point is that I am attempting to take out my aggression on the business that is causing the problem rather than on myself. This does, in some sense, feel justified in my mind.

In conclusion, I believe that although anomie and alienation do exist in my life, in my personal case anomie does contribute to my substance abuse while alienation does not. Although both conditions do pro-

duce reactions involving deviant behavior, the behavior manifests itself in different forms. With the feelings of anomie, there does not seem to be anyone to blame. I can point at society as a whole and blame it for my problems, but there is no one entity that I can take my feelings out on. Hence, unfortunately, my only option is to attempt to escape through the use of marijuana. With the feelings of alienation, on the other hand, there is an instigator that I can distinguish and release the tensions on to. Thus, my deviant behaviors are imposed upon my employer. However, I cannot say for sure that this would be the case for all individuals.

This is a topic that would probably be best investigated on an individual basis. Although I do believe that anomie could easily lead to substance abuse in many individuals, I certainly don't feel that it would lead to the same problems for everyone. Likewise, although my feelings of alienation do not cause me to abuse marijuana, surely this might be the case for some people.

REFERENCES

- Durkheim, Emile. (1951). *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. (1970). *The German Ideology*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.