

Addiction and the Humanities, Volume 2 (3) - “Weeding” out Glamour from Reality

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The media often portrays drug use, and television is no exception to this inclination (Strauss, 2005). Popular examples of television programs that depict marijuana use are *Entourage* and *Desperate Housewives* (Strauss, 2005). Showtime’s new show *Weeds* focuses on Nancy Botwin, a pot-dealing suburban mother. This critically acclaimed dramedy has already garnered a Golden Globe for Mary-Louise Parker’s portrayal of Nancy. The show also has created controversy because of claims that it glorifies drug use. The popularity of programs depicting substance use requires an examination of their themes and the potential impact on the public. This week, *Addictions and the Humanities* discusses *Weeds*. Does it represent a new reality or does it just popularize marijuana use? In our discussion, we consider scientific evidence, the show content, as well as some implications of drug use portrayal.



Jenji Kohan, a creator and producer of *Weeds*, asserts that the show is “presenting this [marijuana use] as something that’s everywhere and cuts across political, ethnic, and religious lines.” (Strauss, 2005) In one sense, he is correct. Drug use rates are about the same across inner cities, suburbs, and rural areas

(Chen, Sheth, Elliott, & Yeager, 2004; Scheer, Borden, & Donnermeyer, 2000). So, we might agree that *Weeds* provides awareness about an issue that impacts all communities. Nancy Franklin reviewed *Weeds* for *The New Yorker* and found that “the show itself doesn’t appear to be taking sides when it comes to the legality and morality of marijuana-dealing or possession or use” (Franklin, 2005). However, the disarmingly open-minded nature of the show might be viewed as sympathetic of marijuana use, and perhaps drug use in general (see, for example, its online dictionary <http://www.sho.com/site/weeds/bts.do>). This, of course, has some public health officials and others alarmed. Tom Riley of the Office for National Drug Control Policy, for example, insists that shows like *Weeds* take part in “ ‘Hollywood’s embellishment of marijuana’ ” (Strauss, 2005).

Although it is uncertain whether *Weeds* is part of a systematic movement in support of marijuana use, it is important to consider some possible impacts that this and similar such shows might have on society. Science suggests that media can influence behaviors. For example, the more adolescents are exposed to movies with smoking the more likely they are to start smoking (Dalton, Sargent, et al. 2003). Furthermore, the likeability of film actors and actresses who smoke (both on-screen and off-screen) relates to their adolescent fans’ decisions to smoke (Distefan, Gilpin, Sargent, & Pierce, 1999). Interestingly, movies tend to stigmatize alcohol and tobacco less than other drugs (Cape, 2003); yet, the media provides many positive messages about drug use (Will, Porter, Geller, & DePasquale, 2005). It is possible that such favorable portrayals lead to more use. People critical of such shows have noted that “ ‘when glamorization of drugs has climbed, changes in teen attitudes followed’ ” (Strauss, 2005). There needs to be more research investigating direct, indirect, and interactive effects of media portrayals on drug use behavior.

The issue of glamorization versus reality is complicated. Although the creators and producers of *Weeds* hope to accurately depict drug use, they still need to keep ratings up. Clearly, positive portrayals are more likely to increase ratings and programs might favor acceptance of marijuana use over depictions of potential harms. More research on how media influences drug use is needed in order to evaluate the impact of programs like *Weeds*. With media and drug use, it is important to walk with caution, as the line between reality and glamorization is easy to cross.

What do you think? Comments can be addressed to Sarbani Hazra.

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