

Addiction and the Humanities, Vol. 6 (1) - The evolution of anti-drug ads from *Fried Egg* to *Shoulders*

January 13, 2010

This is your brain. This is drugs. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions? These words, part of a 1987 Partnership for a Drug-Free America (PDFA) public-service announcement, are synonymous with the American anti-drug movement of the 1980's. Although the PDFA credits *Fried Egg* with helping to persuade Americans that drugs are dangerous and addictive (The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, 2006), many ridicule the ad because of its overly simplistic, fear-based, and unrealistic tone (Alexander, 2000).

How have anti-drug messages changed during the two decades since *Fried Egg*? The good news is that producers of anti-drug ads have relied more on social science to develop their message content and delivery. For example, research indicates that fear-based messages like *Fried Egg* are ineffective unless they are accompanied by a viable means for reducing one's fears (Job, 1988). As a result, when the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) produced the *What's your Anti-Drug?* campaign, part of a \$1.4 billion effort that spanned the years 1998-2005, some of the ads showed teenagers engaged in positive alternatives to drug use. But, the campaign also included several ads that exaggerated the potential consequences of smoking marijuana. For example, in one ad, teenage marijuana smokers run over a small child with their car; in another, a pot smoker accidentally shoots his friend in the head.

Sometimes, the effect of anti-drug messages is unintended. For example, results from a multi-wave study indicated that the *What's your Anti-Drug?* ads might have done more harm than good. Teenage respondents who had more exposure to the ads were less likely to avoid marijuana and more likely to believe that many of their peers used marijuana (Hornik, Jacobsohn, Orwin, Piesse, & Kalton, 2008). Some observers suggest that the ads might inadvertently have communicated the message that "everyone's doing it" (Hornik et al., 2008). Another study revealed that teenage survey respondents judged six of the ads from the *What's your Anti-Drug?* campaign to be less effective than a control program in reducing drug use

(Fishbein, Hall-Jamieson, Zimmer, von Haeften, & Nabi, 2002). The particularly ineffective ads tended to be seen as unrealistic, uninformative, and fear-based—much like *Fried Egg* (Fishbein et al., 2002).

In 2005, the ONDCP shifted its strategy and, together with the PDFA, launched *Above the Influence*, a multi-media campaign developed using extensive qualitative and quantitative research with teens (Denniston, 2006). This campaign encourages its target audience to rise “above the influence” of drugs and risky sexual activity (The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, 2005). For instance, the *Human Puppet* ad shows a teenage girl passed out under the influence of an unknown substance while her friends draw on her face and position her arms as if she were a puppet. The tagline is *If you're not in control, who is? Shoulders* takes the message of personal autonomy one step further by poking fun at traditional anti-drug messages. Its protagonist is a teenage boy trying to decide whether to accept a marijuana joint offered to him at a party. A series of pro-drug characters, led by the devil, appears on his left shoulder imploring him to accept the joint. Meanwhile, a series of exaggerated anti-drug characters appears on his right shoulder demanding that he refuse to accept it. These include a stern roll-model astronaut, members of the boy's basketball team, and even Shakespeare. As the protagonist makes his decision, a voice-over declares, *The only voice that matters is yours*. Eventually the boy makes his decision to reject the joint, and the message to viewers is that they can still maintain their personal autonomy even if they decide to reject drug use. In this way, the campaign is consistent with research indicating that adolescents place a high value on personal autonomy and often react against prevention messages that seem too “preachy” and directive (Kelly, Comello, & Slater, 2006). Interactive features of the campaign's website also aim to change normative beliefs about how many adolescents use drugs, perhaps in response to earlier findings.

The ONDCP ad *Shoulders*, available at <http://www.mediacampaign.org/>

Is *Above the Influence* working? As evidence of their ads' effectiveness, the ONDCP frequently points to downward national trends in teenage drug use (e.g. Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2004). But, Hornik and colleagues (2008) note the existence of larger declines in tobacco and alcohol use by teens, which suggest that there is a broad influence of widespread cultural shifts that goes beyond the ONDCP/PDFA campaigns. During the coming years, the ONDCP plans to collect new data that will allow them to generate more specific

conclusions about the campaign's effects on drug-related attitudes, beliefs, and intentions; they intend to use this information to refine their future messages. Successfully refining the marketing strategy will be a challenge, because it is very difficult to market health information to teens. However, by empirically evaluating outcomes and generating evidence-based messages, the ONDCP is taking a big step forward from *This is your brain on drugs*.

-Heather Gray

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