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Drug Testing as Symbolic Managerial Action: In Response to "A Case Against Workplace Drug Testing"

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(Drugs; Workplace Drug Testing; Symbolism; Institutional Theory; Phenomenology)

In contrast to much of the management and organizational literature supporting drug testing (Coombs and Coombs 1991, Cowan 1987, Harris and Heft 1992), Debra Comer's (1994) "A Case Against Workplace Drug Testing" presents a refreshing series of arguments against this practice. Comer (1994) carefully scrutinizes and summarizes a substantial body of empirical and conceptual literature on workplace drug testing, on the basis of which, she makes a compelling argument against it. Comer even suggests that frequently, drug testing can have adverse consequences for organizations in terms of hurting employee morale, productivity and performance.

For the most part, we are in agreement with Comer's findings. However, we suggest that her paper falls short of offering a convincing explanation for the continued use of drug testing in the workplace. Her case against drug testing is marshalled from two distinct vantage points: (1) normative, and (2) instrumental. Both are incomplete when it comes to explaining the prevalence

of workplace drug testing. In the remainder of this paper, we explain why we think these two perspectives are inadequate, and suggest an alternative way of looking at the phenomenon.

The Limitations of Normative and Instrumental Positions

First of all, Comer's case against drug testing is explicitly normative. That is, she questions the *morality* of drug testing by underscoring its violation of employee privacy rights. On account of these violations, she suggests that drug testing is "morally inappropriate" (Comer 1994, p.). We have no quarrel with this position, and in fact share her values concerning this issue. Nevertheless, we also suggest that this does not contain sufficient grounds to make a convincing case against drug testing.

For one thing, Comer's view represents just *one* moral or normative position. Other normative positions could conceivably view drug testing quite differently. For instance, one ethical stand might view drug use itself as morally wrong or sinful, and consequently see

drug testing as a morally appropriate technique for eradicating it. Still others might value the collective good of the organization above the deprivation of certain individual rights. Our question is: How are we to evaluate the superiority of any of these normative positions as a starting point for recommending the use or withdrawal of drug testing? By failing to take into account these alternative normative stands, Comer dilutes the potency of her own ethical arguments against drug testing.

Second, most of Comer's arguments against drug testing are marshalled from an *instrumental* position. That is, she argues against the practice on the grounds that it often works against the instrumental ends of the organization, notably performance and productivity. Her findings come as no surprise to us. In fact, in an earlier paper (Prasad et al. 1992), we argued along much the same lines. However, the limitation with this standpoint is that it leads Comer to implicitly assume that many of the negative consequences of drug testing are unknown to managers, and furthermore, that once they recognized these limitations, they would undoubtedly recognize the error of their ways, and abandon the practice of drug testing altogether. We suggest something quite different. We propose that managers are indeed aware (at least to some extent) of many of the pitfalls of drug testing. Yet, they continue to use and endorse it.¹

Comer, however, assumes that most managerial practices are solely designed to achieve narrowly instrumental ends, and that organizations have an "unquestioning faith in the technology" of drug testing. This leads to a further assumption that once organizations realize that drug testing is not instrumentally beneficial, they will cease to employ it.

This is our fundamental point of departure. While we agree with Comer that from a humanistic and instrumental view, drug testing may not be a desirable practice, we need to ask: why do managers and employers continue to advocate and implement drug testing, where there is little evidence of any clear "utilitarian" benefit to the organization? This question might conceivably provide more insights into the prevalence of drug testing in the workplace.

We also suggest that instead of looking for guidance within the micro human relations tradition (Argyris 1957, Likert 1961) as Comer does, we should be exploring the ideas of institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Zucker 1977) and managerial symbolism (Pfeffer 1981). In a series of powerful and well-argued articles, institutional theorists (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Meyer and Rowan 1977, Meyer et al. 1981, etc.)

have suggested that organizations frequently take actions that do *not* have immediate efficiency payoffs, and in fact do so for a number of *non-instrumental* reasons. They also suggest that many of these actions are likely to be driven by institutional imperatives including organizational traditions, isomorphism and ideologies. In a related vein, theorists such as Feldman and March (1981) and Pfeffer (1981) have asserted that a substantial part of managerial and administrative action is symbolic and concerned mainly with symbolic outcomes.

We propose using the insights of these intellectual traditions to understand the prevalence of workplace drug testing. Rather than focus on issues of instrumentality alone, we need to look at the *meanings* that drug testing holds for organizations and their relevant stakeholders, as well as at the underlying values and assumptions behind these programs.

Drug Use as a Symbolic Organizational Crisis

While workplace drug use clearly precipitates problems of safety, performance and morale, at a broader level, it also presents a symbolic crisis of control for management. In other words, given the magnitude of drug use in the workplace, and its inherently elusive and covert nature, it cannot easily be controlled through the use of traditional managerial techniques. Nevertheless, for organizations and their stakeholders, it poses a serious and ongoing problem holding a number of negative meanings and associations. Over and above the performance and productivity issues, the crisis of drugs at work is viewed as an organizational pathology containing both irrational and immoral elements.

A Crisis of Irrationality

In North America, drug taking, for the most part is seen as an irrational act (Reich 1972). Drug use and all its associations with adolescence, deviance and the counterculture (Roszak 1969) overwhelmingly represent immaturity and irrationality. In contemporary America, drug taking signals chaos, a loss of self-control and disintegration, and consequently symbolizes the antithesis of organizational rationality.

For organizations however, rationality is the core principle that shapes their form and actions (Alvesson 1987, Denhardt 1981) leading to their emphasis on impersonality, instrumentality and rule-like behavior. Habitual drug use by organization members threatens to undermine organizational rationality by symbolizing an oppositional consciousness rooted in disorder. Thus,

beyond triggering a crisis of productivity and performance, drug use threatens the fundamental "rational" foundations of organization.

The Crisis of Immorality

Drug use also represents immorality. By virtue of its associations with high levels of personal hedonism and social deviance (Becker 1963, Roszak 1969), drug use also symbolizes self-absorption and consequently is defined as immoral. In this, the social response to alcoholism has amazing parallels to the drug issue. In an earlier comprehensive study of alcoholism in the workplace, Weiss (1986) discusses the view of alcoholism as immoral, which sees the alcoholic as a "sinner" and a deviant from organizational and societal values. Similarly, the drug user also is seen as a deviant who fails to uphold the Protestant work ethic and who shows an immoral disregard for the collective well-being of the organization.

More seriously, at the level of meaning, drug use threatens the moral order of organizations. Barnard (1938) sees organizations as deriving their moral purpose from the voluntary consensus and commitment of their members. Habitual drug use threatens to weaken the commitment of individual employees to the organization, their obligation to maintaining its collective well-being, and their belief in the work ethic. Therefore, it also threatens the very moral fabric of the organization above and beyond its functional performance.

Drug taking clearly represents a crisis of organizational irrationality and immorality. It is also a crisis that does not respond to customary managerial solutions. According to Pfeffer (1981), when events are beyond the control of managers, they tend to revert to symbolic action. It seems likely that the drug crisis in the workplace is such an event, where given the magnitude of the problem, managers may be unable to exercise substantive control and must therefore manage meaning. Further, we propose that drug testing is a symbolic way of managing the meaning of the drug crisis.

The Symbolism of Drug Testing

Drug testing represents certain managerial intents that go beyond ridding the workplace of drug users and restoring high levels of organizational performance. Mainly, drug testing performs certain symbolic functions that are necessary to combat the sense of irrationality and immorality associated with drugs in the

workplace. The following are some symbolic functions of drug testing.

Restoring the Image of Control

Drug testing signals that management is in charge and is taking action. The notion of management has traditionally been associated with action, initiative and control (Edwards 1979, Pfeffer 1981). In the event of a seemingly irrational crisis such as drugs in the workplace, management may lose its legitimacy if it is perceived as being passive and failing to take control of the situation. However controversial drug testing may be, it focuses attention on the fact that something is being done about drugs in the workplace. Feldman and March (1981) also emphasize that periodically, organizations need to provide "ritualistic assurances" of managerial initiative and competence to relevant stakeholders. Concrete efficiency results notwithstanding, drug testing can serve to convince labor, consumers and government that organizations are indeed coping with and controlling the drug crisis.

The Scientific Response

Drug testing is essentially a *scientific* procedure based on the insights of modern Western medicine and science, and conducted in research laboratories by medical experts. As such, the use of drug testing symbolizes a neutral, scientific response to a crisis of irrationality. Given the threats that drug use poses to rationality, a response of a scientific and "objective" nature is more likely to reaffirm rationality than a more subjective response (such as supervisors using their own judgment to locate chronic drug users) which might be seen as too arbitrary and irrational itself.

Further, as many scholars have consistently held, the nature of modern management is essentially "technocratic" (Alvesson 1987, Denhardt 1981). That is, it is rooted in the ideology of scientific problem solving and wedded to the use of scientific and technical solutions. The use of drug testing is thus perfectly compatible with the managerial ideological orientation as well.

Interestingly, an historical analysis reveals that similar organizational problems of disorder and deviance in the past, have also been met with "neutral" and scientific responses. Alcoholism, for instance was also responded to by clinical and "medical" solutions within organizations (Weiss 1986). In fact, Sonnenstuhl (1980, p. 123) asserts that historically, "management has introduced *under the guise of science*, a number of policies designed to set work standards, motivate workers and control deviants." Thus, drug testing is historically and ideologically consistent with managerial responses

to organizational deviance, and is designed to send a message that the drug problem is being met with an appropriate scientific solution.

Providing Moral Legitimation

Institutional theory asserts that a substantial portion of organizational activity is undertaken in order to *legitimate* the organization in the eyes of its constituents and stakeholders. Meyer and Rowan (1977) even propose that a number of institutionalized products, policies and programs dramatically reflect the myths and norms of their institutional environments.

Following from this position, it is possible to see drug testing as a legitimating practice which is consistent with the "myths" of organizational control and order, and which at the same time reflects the institutional values opposing drug use. Further, drug testing also symbolizes management's intent to clean up the workplace. Unlike more local organizational measures such as employee counselling, supervisory identification of chronic drug users etc., drug testing is much more rigorous and universal in its scope. Accordingly, it simultaneously signals management's *wholehearted* intent to rid the workplace of drugs, and its moral stance.

Given the "moral" connotations of the drug crisis, this response might be institutionally most appropriate. The "immoral" nature of the drug crisis demands the appearance of *reform* in the workplace. Again, historically, American management has periodically engaged in some form of workplace reform or other (Edwards 1979, Scott 1992, Waring 1991). Usually, these managerial reform movements have attempted to create "model" communities of workers which are relatively free of "sin" and "vice", and which are consequently more productive. The community of women factory workers at Lowell, Massachusetts (Nelson 1975, Ware 1964) and the famous experiment at Pullman (Buder 1967) are testimonials to this strain of American management. In both cases, the "morality" of the workers was strongly advertised, and management took upon itself the guardianship of this morality. By signalling management's desire to clean up the workplace, drug testing may well be a contemporary symbol of managerial reform.

We could continue to enumerate and discuss many other symbolic functions of drug testing. For instance, the use of drug testing could indicate an organization's ability to move with the times by adopting a "cutting-edge" technology. Or, for companies accused of lack of concern for the environment, consumers' rights etc., it can provide symbolic evidence of corporate social re-

sponsibility. The point is that in order to understand drug testing or *any* organizational practice, we need to examine its relevant institutional context. Only then, can we comprehend why it is being used and what consequences it may have.

While Comer does a proficient job of listing the harmful effects of drug testing, her failure to understand its symbolic value considerably weakens her case against it. While we do not necessarily support drug testing on ethical or humanistic grounds, we do suggest that we cannot talk about abolishing it without fully understanding what it accomplishes at the organizational level in the first place. We hope that our discussion of these issues stimulates further debate on this matter.²

Endnotes

¹In a series of undergraduate projects conducted in Western Massachusetts in 1989-1990, our students who interviewed managers on this issue found them well aware of many of the problems raised by drug testing. Despite this, many of the managers continued to regard drug testing as a necessary organizational practice.

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