

## Kava: A Line of Research

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**ABSTRACT** A research project may link up with a life-long career to expand slowly both inwards and externally. In the present case, a project studying the use of kava and the relationship of this drug to cults, has led the principal investigator to reflect on the personal inner search and the wider network of relationships that developed over subsequent decades. Reflections on research projects during the course of a career may be intriguing both for deeper levels of significance for the project, and for the development of linkages beyond.

A line of research, especially that conducted on an esoteric topic such as the drug kava (*Piper methysticum*, Forst.) may not be useful or practical directly. In the longer run, such a research endeavor by a scholar may become valuable to the person, the discipline, students who study with a given teacher, and a range of others. Indirect impacts invariably are multiple. The following reflections on a research project are based upon a research career, and subsequent teaching experiences.

### DRUGS AND CULTS

In 1967, having completed a Ph.D. and intent upon a research career, I noted the impact of the drug scene on teenagers in North Carolina, United States. I worked at a Mental Health Center as a Research Scientist, and explored my community. I worked closely with the police, the schools, the various health and social agencies, and even the military in this particular locale. The nearby military post expanded dramatically while the Vietnam War raged and brought extreme social change, and marihuana, LSD, speed, and heroin, to the community in question.

Marijuana, LSD, and heroin use were widespread among returning military troops and subsequently, the teenagers and many others in the town. The police, both conservative and liberal members of the community, and the political

authorities feared the rapid increase in drug use and abuse so evident. Many teenagers, however, turned eagerly to drug experimentation, then adopted this "new technology." The authorities soon tried their best to halt the rather massive "abuse of drugs."

On the streets, peer groups of young people supported each other strongly, usually in clear and defiant opposition to any adults. When one teenager began using illegal substances, peers soon followed. These groups served as natural conduits for the "new technology." The police realised they could send in an undercover agent and quickly acquire names and addresses of dozens and even hundreds of participants in the "illegal use of drugs." In 1968, approximately every two months a "drug bust" occurred, and the numbers of young people arrested averaged around one hundred persons at a time. The court costs, lawyer's fees, and publicity meant difficult times for many families, and costly expenses for the parents involved.

Many of the parents supported the police and their actions. The young people then turned even further to their peers for support. Many left home, and the hippie and drug cultures (not always the same) flourished. Opposition to President Nixon, the Vietnam War, and authorities in general grew rapidly.

Over the next few years, I worked with a social science think tank and then directed a substance abuse programme in another city in North Carolina. I encountered hundreds of people using and abusing drugs, and worked with hundreds of parents, police, teachers, and authorities. The question raised in my mind, and particularly in my desire for research, was: "If, how, and why a drug and a cult-like movement were linked together?" The social movement then taking place was a challenging time for American society, and the potentially linked drug use represented an intellectual challenge, as well as a serious social problem.

I speculated then that a cross-cultural study might help explain the if, how, and why questions. At nearby Duke University, I studied with Weston LaBarre, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, who had worked with the American Indian Ghost Dance and the Peyote Cults in the 1930's (LaBarre, 1938) and then with the Snake Handling Cults of Appalachia in the 1950's or 1960's (LaBarre, 1964).

With his help, I formulated the research questions, then drafted a grant request to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, and continued to read as much as I could on cults, drugs and worldwide locales for anthropological fieldwork. I was especially intrigued with the islands in the Pacific region for the many stories of cargo cults appealed. Tanna, in the New Hebrides, had a long history with the John Frum Cargo Cult and possible ties to the relatively mild drug, kava. I even travelled through the Pacific with an anthropologist colleague, to gain familiarity with the islands, their cultures, and possible locations for research.

The research grant was eventually approved, enabling me to travel to Tanna to study the John Frum Cargo Cult and its relationship to the use of kava, their drug of choice. On Tanna, kava was elevated to daily use by virtually all adult males, but was strictly prohibited for females. Kava was a symbol of opposition to the government and the Presbyterian Church, which from the 1850 to 1940 era, had sought, with what they regarded as noble intentions, to take over the island and its people. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending upon whose point of view one accepted, the reaction against the church and the government was nearly complete and a classic "cargo cult" operated from 1940 onwards.

For 15 months, I gathered ethnographic data, and then studied in archives and libraries in Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand. My initial report, completed in 1978, argued that kava and the cult were related, with similar social and political dynamics as compared with the situation in North Carolina. The bonding experience shared among those directly using a drug is one reason for the strong links of empathy between individuals. The people involved may even evolve a common language, world-view, and generate high regard for each other as a result. Further however, the

controls set in place by "authorities" has an enormous impact as well, possibly even greater than the bonding experience by those using the drugs in question.

Perhaps the most intriguing idea that emerged was that of an inter-lock, such that given both drug and cult, the link between becomes very powerful. If only a drug, or only a cult is involved, then the situation is not solidified. Authorities can deal relatively easily with control over the people involved. If both drug and cult are locked together however, then strong opposition to authorities, a cult or social movement, and conflicts appear likely.

This research is of special interest for the future, as pharmaceutical companies produce far more sophisticated drugs and products. Mood elevators, depressors, memory enhancers, memory erasers, emotional changers, and more are being studied. If and when these drugs are available on the black market, there is high likelihood of further cults and social movements.

To understand the drug kava, a multi- or trans-disciplinary view is essential, including information and ideas from chemistry, medicine, physiology, psychology, botany, geography, linguistics, history, sociology, religion, anthropology and politics. Over the years, my publication list has grown as I have re-examined the field work experiences and looked at various facets and developed the "line of research" further.

The effects of the research experience have been many and varied. Internally, my life has been richer in that I became acquainted with people of another culture, including their ways of living, thinking, and valuing. This experience enabled me to have alternative viewpoints, and see my own culture quite differently. My inner self became stronger, in that I had adapted to a very different culture, and I knew that if called upon, I could adapt to still other cultures. The effects of sojourns, travel, and fieldwork are profound, albeit few express those changes in their writings.

Externally, I gained insights and knowledge about another world, and many associated links to colleagues, research literature, and related projects. These added connections have stood me in good stead academically, in teaching, in planning and executing research, and in dealing

with bureaucratic and social structures in my own culture. The gifts of knowledge and insight have been transmitted to students, colleagues, and various public audiences over the years, enriching both their and my lives in many ways.

Over subsequent years, therefore, the meaningfulness of a research endeavour may expand, with deeper insights into personal growth, wider interests, additional professional activities, enriched values, and an increasing network of colleagues having similar interests. One certainly becomes a more reflective, wiser and gentle teacher, even though the topics I have taught, e.g., rehabilitation and community psychology, have been somewhat removed from my early research interests.

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