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# Perspectives

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## Max Weber and the Opioid Crisis

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## Max Weber and the Opioid Crisis

**Hannah Pease**

Opioid addictions have intensified throughout the United States since 2007, and examining the authority and domination of the justice department versus the power of Purdue pharma in a system of democracy has exposed Purdue's role in this crisis. Throughout the New York Times article, *Origins of an Epidemic: Purdue Pharma Knew Its Opioids Were Widely Abused* by Barry Meier, there are numerous examples of how commonly prescribed opioids, which were originally treatments for pain, rapidly spiralled down into a drug-craving catastrophe. Max Weber, a German sociologist interested in macro and micro level societal effects on individuals, gave us a foundation in which we can explain and support connections between company power and legal authority. Connecting this epidemic to Max Weber's theories, he would argue that there is instrumental rational action, prestige and legitimacy within the pharmaceutical corporation and legal authority present in the societies that are heavily impacted by opioids and in the company's intent to sell.

There is a strong sense of *instrumental rational action* in the effective way individuals of Purdue Pharma's sales representative team are trained to sell the drug regardless of its psychological consequences. OxyContin's long-acting formulation was supposed to reduce its appeal to drug abusers and the effect turned out to be the exact opposite, Purdue Pharma was confronted with evidence gathered by prosecutors that it "trained sales representative to tell doctors that OxyContin was less addictive" (Meier 2018). Weber would see this as individuals weighing the pros and cons of this decision and actively choosing to have these sales representatives represent this addictive drug as not as powerful, and hiding the truth from the public. This would be because we are interested in "achieving a particular, rational action is a

strategic, cost-benefit action” (Dillon 2014:130). In a study conducted by researchers from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver discovered that a 30-milligram tablet of MS Contin that would cost \$1 at a pharmacy would cost \$40 on the street. When members of Purdue Pharma “did not send the Canadian study to the F.D.A. or tell sales representatives” (Meier, 2018). Weber would evaluate this as individuals being completely aware and knowledgeable about what was going on, and choosing to conceal this information from the public. This is because of these individuals and their access to resources, political power, and the ability to use their high status and power as advocates as to why it was not necessary to share this information with these groups of people.

The Justice Department’s action is consistent with *instrumental rationalism*, yet in acknowledging the superior resources of Purdue Pharma, the federal government lacks the power needed to properly address addiction as a significant issue. A copy of a confidential Justice Department report showed that federal prosecutors investigating the company found that “Purdue Pharma knew about significant abuse of OxyContin,” and pills were being “crushed and snorted” (Meier, 2018). This then captures the idea behind the “calculating means-end behavior that individuals engage in when they make cost-benefit decisions about a course of action” (Dillon, 2014:130). Weber would say that the officials in charge of the justice department knew that these pills were being abused, however their lack of resources and power could not challenge Purdue Pharma’s individual officials effectively. Because of the Justice Department’s lack of influence, company officials described OxyContin as “the hottest thing on the street” (Meier, 2018). This indicates that once this drug is unleashed on the population, officials cannot control what happens next. This is significant because a surplus of people then become addicts, and a lead contributor of this is the Justice Departments lack of persuasiveness.

Purdue's decision to advertise OxyContin as less addictive is effective because the company, as a "*science*" or pharmaceutical corporation, is afforded a great deal of prestige and subsequent legitimacy. Soon after OxyContin was on the market, people started to seek out OxyContin due to this drug's higher narcotic levels when comparing them to other, shorter-acting painkillers when it was "believed to reduce" (Meier, 2018) its appeal. Weber would explain this as because of the company's status level, they have the opportunity to say something and have it powerfully affect the people they share that information with. To go along with this, Purdue Pharma decided not to send that Canadian study to the F.D.A. because the company "did not consider the small study's results significant" (Meier, 2018). Weber would examine this as people not asking follow-up questions, and not doubting their authority because they are professionals. Weber would say that this is an example of when people believe these professionals should know what they're talking about, and it is easy for the public to fall in this trap of believing false information. This is because our society fully embraces the idea that the practical value of "scientific knowledge and its relevance to advancing economic and social progress" (Dillon, 2014:147).

Authority within institutions is dictated by the state, as the Bush Administration did not approve of the charges against Purdue Pharma, showing us that their *legal authority* is limited. After a four-year investigation, the prosecutors recommended that the top three executives from Purdue Pharma receive felony charges however top Justice Department officials did not support the move and "Instead, the government settled the case in 2007" (Meier, 2018). Weber would explain this as the state not granting them the authority to pursue individual felony criminal charges, so they couldn't get in as much trouble with the Justice Department as they likely should have. To go along with this, several former government officials said that the decision to

not give more serious charges meant that a “critical chance to slow the trajectory of the opioid epidemic was lost” (Meier, 2018). The Justice Department did not bring more serious chargers because of the lack of evidence and authority that they had over Purdue Pharma as a whole, as authority is linked to “social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges” (Dillon, 2014:114). The authority that Purdue Pharma had over the Bush Administration privileged them in the sense that they achieved the outcome that was desired, which was to not receive felony chargers among the individual.

Weber would approach the opioid crisis by studying it through a research question surrounding around what motivates an individual to use a drug that has such intense addictive qualities, as well as the motivations behind social action, specifically addiction by using ideal types. According to Dillon (2014), you can compare Weber’s idea of ideal types to a yardstick, as the way individuals judge other individuals based on the standards that they create can be measured similarly to how physical objects are measured. To go deeper into this idea, Weber would highlight and compare the unique characteristics that are present within addicts, and compare its ideal typical representation with the ideal typical representations of individuals who are not addicts. Furthermore, Weber would look into how it is a rational for these individuals to take this course of action. Weber would notice how in a time of pain, obtaining these drugs is the easy method of getting these pain medications in order to escape their own reality, and how it is a day-to-day, live as you can type of existence. Lastly, he would be involved with the subjective meanings of the individual behaviors as everyone goes through a different experience that requires different explanations as to why they are in the situation that they are in.

## REFERENCES

- Dillon, Michele. 2014. *Introduction to Sociological Theory: Theorists, Concepts, and their Applicability to the Twenty-First Century*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.
- Meier, Barry. 2018. "Origins of an Epidemic: Purdue Pharma Knew It's Opioids Were Widely Abused," *New York Times*, May 29.