‘Mothers Little Helper’ to ‘Crack Moms’:

Public Perception of Women’s Drug Abuse from 1950 to 1990

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From colonial usage of opium to cocaine in Coca-Cola, mood-altering drugs have played a significant role in American history. Although substance abuse disorders have remained a consistent aspect of American society, the perception of people suffering from addiction has changed over time. For women, this change in perception has been drastic and intrinsically linked to race, class, and the progress of women's rights. Prescription drug abuse among wealthy, white women in the 1950's reflected womens adherence to the patriarchy, though opposition from second-wave feminists shifted society's view of female drug-users to empathetic. However, the limited support for women of color in second-wave feminism resulted in the perception of low-income, non-white women during the crack epidemic of the late 1980's-1990's as "crack mothers", a full reversal from the clean image of the 1950's housewife. Though women were the primarily affected group of both the Valium panic and the crack epidemic, the intersection of gender and race informed the media's portrayal and government response. Both wealthy white women and impoverished minority women were victims of societal control– pharmaceutical industry practices, racial targeting by law enforcement, coercive sterilization– and drugs were used as devices by their oppressors.

In the 1950s, post-WWII America had normalized the idea of the housewife and regressed in women's rights since the first wave of feminism. "Housewife syndrome", the mental anguish faced by homemaking women, was drowned by male psychiatrists that significantly over prescribed narcotics[1]. The mental health epidemic among housewives in the 1950s was only magnified by the very health industry's view that feminine attributes were inherently unhealthy compared to the desirable masculine attributes of aggression, assertiveness, and independence[2].

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[1]David L. Herzberg, ""The Pill You Love Can Turn on You": Feminism, Tranquilizers, and the Valium Panic of the 1970s." *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 79-80. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/aq.2006.0026.

[2] Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*. (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 67-9.

Women could only be considered "healthy" by adjusting to societies role for them as meek and submissive, even if these traits were undesirable[3]. It was not just acceptable for wealthy women to abuse prescription pills, but recommended as a solution to the negative mental effects of the oppression they faced. Even today we see prescription pill abuse disproportionately affecting wealthy white women[4].

As second wave feminism grew in response to women's diminished social freedom, the use and abuse of drugs reflected this change. Prescription pill abuse was studied and protested by feminists in the 1960s-1970s, showing a significant change in perception of the drugs by the 1980s, although homemaking women's abuse of Valium remained prominent. A culture of concern began to grow with research reflecting the dangers of abusing prescription pills. During this transitional period, social perception subverted the notion of drug abuse as a tool for traditional homekeeping and led to a significant change in society's narrative surrounding women, especially mothers, with substance abuse disorders.

By the 1980s and early 1990s, the image of female addiction through the housewife addicted to prescription pills was nearly erased and replaced with a less clean-cut "crack mother" image reflected in the media. Arrest rates rose significantly during this period, with the number of women in state prisons growing 75% from 1986 to 1991[5]. Many factors intersect into this new social perception, specifically race and class. In the 1950s, drug abuse was most prevalent in demographics that had access to expensive psychiatric care: white, wealthy, suburban housewives. In the later half of the 20th century following Nixon's 1971 decree of the war on

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[3] Chesler, *Women and Madness*, 68-9.
[4] "Painkiller Abuse Among Suburban Housewives," American Addiction Centers, Updated May 21, 2024 https://americanaddictioncenters.org/blog/painkiller-addiction-among-suburban-housewives
[5]"Women Offenders: Gender and Crime," Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 1997. https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/WOPRIS.PDF.

drugs, drug use and abuse had become associated with marginalized groups regardless of consistent rates of usage across races.

Prescription Drug Use Among Mothers in the 1950s

The period following World War II is often referred to as the "age of anxiety". The end of the war and dropping the atomic bomb provoked worldwide anxiety over the use of nuclear weapons. Resumption of life following the war proved that American society had been irrevocably changed. Newly developed suburbs, a booming post-war economy, and the availability of consumer goods such as televisions were among the largest changes during this period. It was these developments that contributed to the growth of the middle-class and subsequent image of the perfect housewife. "Housewife Syndrome" refers to the general nervousness, distress, and anger associated with the loneliness of being a housewife. It originated as an official medical diagnosis for bouts of hysteria and madness faced by homemaking women in the mid 20th century[6]. In the article, "The 'housewife syndrome': An indicator of madness or oppression?", Keely Adams used feminist literature of the time to argue that this diagnosis was reserved for a wealthy, white demographic and associated with college-educated, suburban women. It was this demographic only who could afford psychiatric care, let alone keeping wives in the home[7]. The use and abuse of drugs by women in the 1950s was not just acceptable, but heavily pushed on wealthy, white women as a "cure" for the extreme anxiety brought on by the apathetic housewife lifestyle they were limited to.

Betty Friedan covered this topic extensively in her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique.* Friedan's work on this topic served as a catalyst for the second wave of feminism in the 1960s

[6]Keeley Adams. "The 'housewife syndrome': An indicator of madness or oppression?." ANU Historical Journal 2, No. 2, (2020), 127. https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/INFORMIT.488407461246390.
[7]Adams. "The 'housewife syndrome',"128.

and 1970s because of its depiction of the hardships homemaking women silently endured in earlier periods. Among these plights were extreme anxiety, depression, and a loss of self exacerbated by the notion that to be driven was to be unfeminine and unfit for marriage or motherhood. Friedan used women's magazines to show how small the world became for housewives. Topics covered were limited to maternity fashion, haircare, how to find a husband, and sewing patterns[8]. Male editors of these magazines attributed this selection to the fact that housewives were not interested in social or political issues. One editor said on this point, "[women are] only interested in the family and home. They aren't interested in politics, unless it's related to an immediate need in the home, like the price of coffee" even saying the humor "has to be gentle, [because] they don't get satire"[9]. Friedan interviewed hundreds of women and professionals during her research and found countless housewives across the country suffocated by their role. They confided in her, admitting "I feel empty somehow… incomplete. [...] I feel as if I don't exist", or "I'm a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?" and "I seem to sleep so much.[...] It's not the work. I just don't feel alive"[10]. In Friedan's search to find a woman who was, not just content with, but *fulfilled* in her life as a housewife, she found very few. In one upper-class development she interviewed twenty-eight wives to find sixteen were undertaking psychotherapy, eighteen were taking tranquilizers, and many had attempted suicide or been hospitalized for depression or "vaguely diagnosed psychotic states"[11]. "Housewife Syndrome" was a form of intense depression brought on by the rigid social expectations of women, however, the treatment was as flawed as the conditions that caused it.

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[8]Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 34-35.
[9]Friedan*, Feminine Mystique,* 37.
[10]Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 20-22.
[11]Friedan, *Feminine Mystique,* 234-235.

Phyllis Chesler studied the effects of post-war psychiatric care for women in her 1972 book, *Women and Madness,* and argued that the prevalence of men in the field negatively impacted the care they receive. Some of the reasons a woman in the 1950s– often extremely talented, stubborn, and reduced to status of a housewife regardless of career aspirations– might have been institutionalized were no longer caring how they looked, refusal to eat, and sexual disinterest in their husbands[12]. Institutionalization was a male dominated field's reaction to women's refusal to abide by socially accepted norms of the time. Psychotherapy became an increasingly popular outpatient treatment for the "hysteria" experienced by upper-middle class white women who were able to afford it. Chesler argued that the popularity of psychotherapy comes from it's similarities to the only acceptable institution for women of the time: marriage[13]. She wrote, "Both psychotherapy and marriage enable women to safely express and defuse their anger by experiencing it as a form of emotional illness, by translating it into hysterical symptoms: frigidity, chronic depression, phobias, and the like. Each woman as patient thinks these symptoms are unique and are her own fault. She is neurotic, rather than oppressed"[14]. One woman in 1958 documented her positive experience with psychotherapy, though a contemporary reading of the journal shows the flaws in the system. In *My Psychotherapy Helped My Entire Family,* Barbara Scott reflected on "her resentments" towards her husbands "strong" and "dominating" personality that became apparent to her after they married[15]. She felt as though her marriage was no longer a partnership due to his restrictions on her ability to see family, treating her like a child, and using sex as a currency for her basic wishes, notably attending church

[12]Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 5.
[13]Phyllis Chesler,"Women as Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Patients." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 33, no. 4 (1971): 751. https://www.jstor.org/stable/349448.
[14]Chesler, "Women as Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Patients," 752.
[15]Barbara Scott "My Psychotherapy Helped My Entire Family." *Marriage and Family Living* 20, no. 2 (1958): 129. https://doi.org/10.2307/348357.

together and a share of his income[16]. She lived a life ripe for contracting housewife syndrome, and showed symptoms shared by women that Friedan interviewed when she realized, ”My thinking had been muddled for quite a while, but suddenly it became crystal clear. I had figured my role out, but what about my personality?”[17]. After being treated with psychotherapy, she blamed all the issues in her marriage and unhappiness on herself. She praised how understanding her husband was to forgive her and only fell deeper into her role as a mother and a wife. Upon seeking a solution for her unformed personality, she and her husband were to have a night to themselves.

> It was Saturday evening and I was hoping for two things: a date for the movies that night and a two day out-of-town trip for the next week. Bob had said he would let me know about the trip that evening. He came home, dead tired, from a full day of hunting, which is his passionate pursuit two and one-half months every fall. He had forgotten the movies. At 9:30, I inquired about our trip. "Sorry, no trip. Business and hunting interfere," he said kindly but firmly. He could see that I was considerably upset, but he was too tired to argue. Rather than face one of my "depressions" he went to bed. For a long while I sat alone, taking stock of myself. Suddenly, none of the material things mattered. I just wanted my husband; I wanted to give myself to him wholly without any thought of return, without any resentment. And so I went up to him. We know now that what we thought was a good loving relationship before is a thousand-fold better with the loving tenderness and spiritual feelings we possess and express to each other. It was then that I first realized my thinking had to extend beyond my own self-analysis that my real goal was to find the meaning of LIFE. [18]

Institutionalization and psychotherapy were major treatments for housewife syndrome, but both relied on the additional use of prescription drugs. For Barbara Scott, these were nondescript “sleeping pills” to aid her weeks of muscle pain caused by extreme nervousness[19].

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[16]Scott, “My Psychotherapy Helped My Entire Family,” 129-130.
[17]Scott, “My Psychotherapy Helped My Entire Family,” 131.
[18]Scott, “My Psychotherapy Helped My Entire Family,” 131.
[19]Scott, “My Psychotherapy Helped My Entire Family,” 129.

For other women, it was just these pills that gave them strength against despair brought on by their oppression.

These drugs could be classified into three main categories: amphetamines, barbiturates, and tranquilizers. Amphetamines– pep pills, uppers, stimulants– were commonly prescribed to women suffering from fatigue, depression, or wishing to lose weight. Among some of the most popular amphetamines of the 1950s were Miratran, Benzedrine, and Dexedrine. A 1956 article in *Cosmopolitan,* titled "Have a New Figure by Summer", ensured its readers that these drugs can be helpful in losing weight if used correctly. They claimed that women on the drug can lose a pound more every week than someone who is simply dieting or exercising[20]. Another women's magazine from 1954 called Miratran excellent for "lifting you out of the blues", and cited a drug study where 90% of participants were more confident and happy after taking the pill[21]. While, of course, taking a legal drug as prescribed can help those suffering, that was not always the case with these stimulants. Amphetamines are highly addictive and harmful if abused– taken in excess, without need, or otherwise unspecified by a medical professional. Negative side effects of these amphetamines are insomnia, irritability, and anxiety. Barbiturates act in a far different way from amphetamines, but were often prescribed for similar reasons. They are used to slow brain activity by producing gamma waves, sedating or "numbing" the user. This is the class of drugs most associated with the term "sleeping pills". The same women's magazine that praised Miratran in 1954, *Redbook,* released an article in 1968 looking critically at the state of prescription medicine in the United States. They cited an article in *The New York Times,* that

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[20]Donald G. Cooley, "Have a New Figure by Summer," *Cosmopolitan*, June 1956, https://www.proquest.com/wma/docview/2007360973/fulltext/9E4FA934C7CE48C1PQ/1?accountid=14270&sourcetype=Magazines&imgSeq=4.

[21]Alton L. Blakeslee, "You and Your Health", *Redbook*, September 1954, https://www.proquest.com/wma/docview/1807531185/E46F7FFDD8A94897PQ/3?imgSeq=2&sourcetype=Magazines&imgSeq=2

claimed barbiturate abuse accounted for nearly 1,500 deaths a year[22]. Many of these deaths were suicides or accidental overdoses, though in some instances it was impossible to distinguish. In the case of all drugs, a resistance is built up over time. Women in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves with unexpected and severe dependency on the substance, requiring larger, more dangerous, doses that can be life threatening. Chemical or psychological dependency resulted in severe withdrawal with symptoms like extreme nausea, delirium, and in some cases, death. These pills were very effective in altering states of mind, which made them highly sought after by those with a tendency towards addiction. In 1965, the FDA seized control over production of stimulants and barbiturates due to the high rates of abuse and consequent bootleg market[23]. The downfall of these drugs was how effective they were in altering mental states and the addictive properties that came with. The response of drug companies was to produce medicine that can "do the barbiturates job without the barbiturates side effects", known as mild tranquilizers[24]. At the time, they were thought to be non-addictive and have minimal side effects. However, this only caused users to take more of the pills throughout the day "as needed". The addictive properties were made clear after rampant overprescription and irresponsible self administration.

The first commercially successful prescription pill to hit the mainstream was Miltown. The quick-acting tranquilizer was released in 1955, widely advertised as non-habit forming, and was a massive commercial hit. In 1956, 1 in every 7 Americans had tried prescription tranquilizers, of which Miltown was the most popular. An estimated 36 million tranquilizer

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[22] Sam Blum. "Pills That Make You Feel Good," *Redbook*, August 1968, 128. https://www.proquest.com/wma/docview/1847837959/BEC25C92F7B84542PQ/4?imgSeq=5&sourcetype=Magazines&imgSeq=5

[23] "Part III: Drugs and Foods Under the 1938 Act and Its Amendments," FDA, Last Modified February 2, 2018. https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/changes-science-law-and-regulatory-authorities/part-iii-drugs-and-foods-under-1938-act-and-its-amendments

[24]Blum, "Pills That Make You Feel Good," 128.

prescriptions had been filled and over 1.5 billion of these pills were sold in the United States[25]. Miltown marked a significant change in pharmaceutical drugs: prescribing happiness and relief from daily struggles rather than simply treating illnesses[26]. A major reason for this breakout success was the popularity of the drug among stars in the entertainment industry giving the pill a luxurious image during the rapid expansion of American consumerism. Some of the largest Hollywood stars– Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Lucille Ball– and directors like *Gone With the Wind*'s David O. Selznick infamously depended on the abuse of prescription pills to stay relaxed and energetic through long days on set. The industry was intertwined with prescription drug abuse, and Miltown was a hit within it. Actress Tallulah Bankhead joked that she had taken so much Miltown that she felt "obligated to pay taxes in New Jersey", where the drug was first produced[27]. With the outspoken endorsement of television stars like Milton Berle, who joked that he used the pill so much he should change his name to "Miltown Berle", and comedians such as Sketlon from *Red Skelton Show*, Miltown was thought to be as widely discussed in 1956 television as Elvis Presley[28]. The drug turned into a household name within months, and the Miltown craze was quickly devoured by middle-class housewives. The drug was overwhelmingly celebrated as a cure-all for daily issues in women's magazines released in the mid-late 1950s. A 1955 issue of *Cosmopolitan* praised Miltown as a sleeping aid, as well as a treatment for ill-behaved children[29]. A 1957 issue of the magazine *Good Housekeeping* offered

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[25]Thomas Whiteside, "Onward and Upward with The Arts," *The New Yorker,* May 3, 1950, 98-133. https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1958-05-03/flipbook/132/

[26]Andrea Tone. *The Age of Anxiety: A History of America's Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central, 28. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/templeuniv-ebooks/reader.action?docID=625190

[27]Tone, *The Age of Anxiety,* 58.

[28]Tone, *The Age of Anxiety,* 64-65.

[29]Lawrence Galton. "A New Drug Brings Relief for the Tense and Anxious: What's New in Medicine." *Cosmopolitan,* August, 1955, 82-83. https://www.proquest.com/magazines/new-drug-brings-relief-tense-anxious/docview/1999138123/se-2.

Miltown as an ideal treatment for premenstrual syndrome, including a study of 42 women wherein "most of them had complete relief and the others had partial relief from their symptoms", including nausea, headaches, and irritability[30]. Miltown was far from the only prescription drug abused in the 1950s, but its widespread adoration by stars and the middle-class made it extremely unique and set a foundation for prescription drug abuse in mid-20th century America.

Among the prescribed drugs most commonly abused by and associated with housewives was a sedative called diazepam, better known by the brand name Valium. The drug was first produced in 1963, and by 1972 it had become the most prescribed medicine in the country with over 50 million prescriptions sold annually[31]. Although these pills were legally prescribed to women by medical professionals, they were self administered at a rate that led to decades of invisible addiction within the upper-middle class. In 1988, *Newsday* described Valium as the "ultimate, if controversial, symbol of the age of anxiety"[32]. For an age riddled with uncertainty and fear, Valium seemed like the perfect solution. One woman who was given Valium after suffering a massive heart attack described the magnitude of the relief saying, "When I took the Valium I knew I was either going to live or I was going to die– and either one was all right"[33]. It was a "miracle drug", a "cure all", and it was incredibly addictive. All the while, this addiction was legal, prescribed by doctors, and primarily controlling women who were suffering from

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[30]"Keep Up with Medicine." *Good Housekeeping.* May 1957, 190. https://www.proquest.com/magazines/keep-up-with-medicine/docview/1847796688/se-2.

[31] Ingrid Waldron. "Increased Prescribing of Valium, Librium, and Other Drugs: An Example of the Influence of Economic and Social Factors on the Practice of Medicine," *International Journal of Health Services* 7*,* No. 1. (1977): 38. https://doi.org/10.2190/FPJT-V9YE-VWM1-UXPA

[32]Marilyn Goldstein. "America's Tranquilizer: a "Miracle Pill" 25 Years Later," *Newsday*, January 19, 1988: A1. https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/1813475781/8B5D6B17DA984009PQ/2?sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers

[33]Goldstein, "America's Tranquilizer," 3.

mental health conditions that were worsened by their limited role in society. While the drug's popularity grew, so did the concern that it may have harmful physical and mental side effects for the large population that was abusing them. Valium was being prescribed with barbiturates, stimulants, and taken alongside casual tobacco and alcohol use, which led to chemical interference in patients and a cycle of new conditions treated with more pills. Despite the perception that these were somehow "morally acceptable" drugs because of their acceptance by institutions and popularity among wealthy, white women, addiction presented itself similarly to illicit drug use.

Changes in Societal Perceptions from 1960 to 1980

Rates of prescription drug abuse in no way slowed after the 1950s. In fact, they increased by over 50%[34]. However, the period from the 60s to early 80s showed a major cultural shift in the perception of women's drug abuse. Tranquilizer addiction was seen as a serious issue, whereas the 1950s painted drug dependency as a normal and necessary part of women's lives. With the growth of second wave feminism came a stronger force of criticism against the over prescription of Valium and other licit drugs. The Freudian influenced zeitgeist of 1950s healthcare labeled women as hysterical and mentally ill by nature[35]. Feminists rallied against the over prescription of drugs and psychiatric institutions as a whole. Addiction became a major fear among wealthy, white housewives– not only their own prescribed abuse, but also their children's turn towards illicit drugs. It was this fear that largely contributed to Nixon's 1971 war on drugs, and the creation of a hierarchy of social perception in addiction ranging from the "forgivable" legal abusers to the "unforgivable" illegal.

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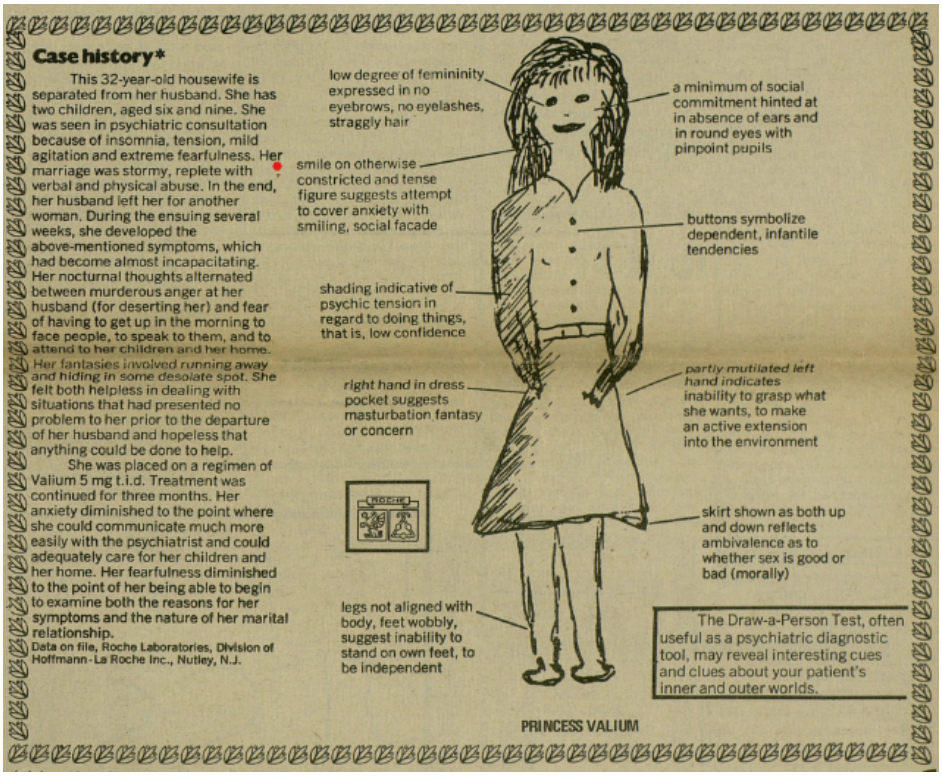
[34]Waldron, "Increased Prescribing of Valium, Librium, and Other Drugs," 38.
[35] Chesler, *Women and madness,* 67-69.

Feminist critique towards psychopharmacology of the mid-20th century relied mostly on the baseless over prescribing of mood altering drugs to women by a predominantly male field. A number of feminist publications from the early 70s touch on this issue, with one 1970 issue of *Everywoman* focused on the "draw a person" test advertised to psychiatrists to determine women's mental health diagnoses. Sylvia Hartman wrote on the gendered bias of psychiatrists in her scathing article, *Princess Valium Meets Shrink Think,* "To them, anatomy is still destiny. A woman's place is in the home- where she is happiest. The Normal Woman gets her fulfillment by giving up herself for her husband and children. An Aggressive Woman (i.e., a woman who is, say, competent outside the home) is castrating, neurotic, and trying to be a man. And so on."[36]. Hartman went on to pick apart the DAP test that came from a Roche Laboratory case file, the company which first introduced benzodiazepines (tranquilizers), such as Valium, to the public



[36]Sylvia Hartman. "Princess Valium Meets Shrinkthink" *Everywoman* 1, no. 2. May 29, 1970, 1. https://jstor.org/stable/community.28036097.

through marketing[37]. Hartman argued the psychologist's assertions that the addition of buttons implied the subject has "infantile tendencies", shading showed low confidence, and a crooked line in the skirt indicated sexual confusion revealed gendered bias in diagnostic procedures[38]. Hartman's piece and the implications of the DAP test spread across like-minded publications, including a 1971 article in *Berkley Tribe* titled "Women to Women". This article focused on the ways that society had conditioned women to suppress their genuine desire to learn in order to prioritize men. One section read, "For so long, society has used its own definitions to keep us women in our place– making us distrust our reality and emotions. The behavior most encouraged is whatever will make us easier to control: compliance, malleability, and servility"[39]. This sentiment, along with growing concern regarding birth defects and the danger of pairing prescription drug abuse with alcohol, became an essential feminist argument against over-prescription of mood-altering drugs in the mid-20th century. In turn, feminism was made out to be a cure for women's drug addictions because of the correlation between drug abuse and female oppression.

Depictions of middle-class women's addiction in mainstream media had begun to change substantially during this period. As awareness of the dangers of addiction grew, so did the desire to assign blame and hold institutions responsible. Magazine articles like one 1971 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* warned that the average woman abusing drugs is "in short, an average, middle-class American– one of the folks next door. She could even be you"[40]. This idea sparked an era known as the "Valium panic", not the first and far from the last major drug panic in

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[37]Jeannette Y. Wick,"The History of Benzodiazepines." *The Consultant Pharmacist : The Journal of the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists,* Vol. 28, no. 9 (2013): 538-48. doi:10.4140/TCP.n.2013.538
[38]Hartman, "Princess Valium Meets Shrinkthink," 8.
[39]"Women to Women." *Berkeley Tribe* 5, no. 101, June 25, 1971. https://jstor.org/stable/community.28033850.
[40]"Women and Drugs: A Startling Journal Survey." *Ladies' Home Journal,* November, 1971, 191. https://www.proquest.com/magazines/women-drugs/docview/1914521271/se-2.

American history. However, the scale of the panic was directly correlated to the primary demographic affected: the privileged, wealthy, and white[41]. Narratives around women suffering from prescribed addiction were very sympathetic, with an overarching sense that it was not the fault of individuals. In 1978, former First Lady, Betty Ford, came public about the drug and alcohol dependence she suffered while her husband was president. A distinction was made apparent between "drug problems" and "addiction", similar to distinction between licit and illicit drug use. Those closest to Ford's treatment insisted that she was not addicted, but rather suffered from overmedication because of arthritis and cancer treatment she underwent in a similar time frame[42]. This showed how society pushed Valium and other prescription drug abuse into the "acceptable" category and distanced it from "unacceptable" illicit drug use. In an excerpt from her 1978 autobiography, Ford admitted, "At first, I was bitter toward the medical profession. Fourteen years of being advised to take pills, rather than wait for the pain to hit. I had never been without my drugs. I took pills for pain, I took pills to sleep, I took mild tranquilizers. Today things are changing, doctors are being educated right along with the rest of us, but some of them used to be all too eager to write prescriptions"[43]. Although her use of drugs was consistent with addiction, it was labelled otherwise. She was widely praised for her honesty, described as an "inspiration" able to "leap over the barrier between the presidency and the common folk"[44]. While she contributed to the acceptance and empathy towards one kind of drug user, others were not met with such grace.

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[41]David L. Herzberg, ""The Pill You Love Can Turn on You": Feminism, Tranquilizers, and the Valium Panic of the 1970s." *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 80. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2006.0026.
[42]"People: Betty Ford's Drug Problem Not Labeled an Addiction." *Newsday,* Apr 12, 1978, Nassau ed. https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/people/docview/963705349/se-2.
[43]"Tempo: Betty Ford Fights Addiction, Comes to Terms with Life." Chicago Tribune, Mar 13, 1979. https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/tempo/docview/171922920/se-2.
[44]Grace Lichtenstein, "Betty Ford's Victory Over Addiction". The Washington Post, March 1st, 1987, 217. https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/betty-fords-victory-over-addiction/docview/139248825/se-2.

This period in the mid-20th century was marked by a rise in concern and government policies surrounding illicit drugs popular among American youth. Nixon's 1971 decree of a war on drugs was heavily informed by parent's fears that white, suburban teenagers would be corrupted or endangered by non-white "drug pushers"[45]. Drug use among teens had risen substantially by the mid 1960s. A student report by *Seventeen* from 1966 showed one in eighteen highschool aged girls had used drugs recreationally, with half reporting using amphetamines, described as "pep pills"[46]. The article goes on to suggest that one reason for youth drug use was rebelling against parents and purposefully acting in a shocking manner. The addiction of wealthy, white mothers showed a profound impact on their children. In 1966, the Rolling Stones released the song "Mother's Little Helper" on their album, *Aftermath.* Lyrics criticized the prescribed drug abuse of mothers, said "Though she's not really ill, there's a little yellow pill"[47] and juxtaposed adults and teens illicit drug use. These messages directly contradicted the narrative that the government spun regarding non-white "drug pushers" and the "innocent, white youth". Children of prescription drug abusing mothers were growing tired of hypocrisy in anti-drug adults that still regularly engage with and abuse medication along with alcohol and tobacco. Feminist literature, like that of Sylvia Hartman's *Princess Valium,* was overwhelmingly published in college press and counterculture movements that overlap with the wealthy, white demographics that adult prescription drug abusers belong to. Youth subcultures most discussed as at risk of illicit drug abuse were critical of the pharmaceutical industry and the control that it

[45]Matthew D. Lassiter, "Impossible Criminals: The Suburban Imperatives of America's War on Drugs.", Journal of American History 102, no. 1, (2015), 126–8, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav243
[46]Alice Lake, "Drugs: A Student Report." *Seventeen*, September 1966, 170-171. https://www.proquest.com/magazines/drugs-student-report/docview/2007371661/se-2.
[47]The Rolling Stones, "Mothers Little Helper." Lyrics by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. Genius. https://genius.com/The-rolling-stones-mothers-little-helper-lyrics

held over women. Literature and pop culture like Ken Kesey's influential 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and following endeavors as a counterculture icon challenged the widely held perception of "good" and "bad" drugs, and presented younger generations with cynicism built from his personal experience in the psychiatric industry.

Despite the changed perception and pushback from the youth, Valium-abusing women were not regarded as bad people or mothers. Instead, they were victims of an ill-informed industry that got carried away by poorly researched drugs. It was made clear in the media that there were differences between legal and illegal drug abuse, where not all drugs are regarded as equal. Illegal drug abuse– marijuana, LSD, cocaine, heroin– was dangerous and inexcusable, but mass overprescription of mood-altering substances for wealthy, white women was just a fleeting craze. The Valium panic and gendered bias within the psychopharmacology industry revealed how prescription drugs have been used as a form of control towards a social group in our country. Women were disproportionately prescribed pills by a predominantly male psychopharmacology industry as a means to keep them in the homemaking role that triggered the mental health episode they were being treated for. The Valium panic is unique from other drug epidemics because it primarily affected a wealthy, white demographic. Because of this, discourse solely surrounded the drug industry itself rather than disparaging the user. In previous and following epidemics, the victims were not awarded such courtesy. The intersection of race and gender in the perception of female drug abusers shows how this control over social groups dramatically increases when the primary demographic affected is low income and non-white.

In a 1970 White House report, Nixon warned parents about the dangers of gateway drugs and the growing use of illicit substances by the upper classes. He stated, "There has been sort of a general thought that so far as drugs were concerned, we find them chiefly in the ghettos, among

the deprived. That may have previously been the case, but it is not so today. Drugs have moved to the upper middle class. The problem is no longer limited to any one region of the country, or any segment of society"[48]. This fear of urban drug use "infecting" the upper-middle class informed the next 40 years of drug policy and began a divisive era known as the war on drugs. In an1994 interview with *Harper's Bazaar*, John Ehrlichman– most known as the Watergate co-conspirator and White House counsel under Nixon– summed up the motives that began this war, saying "We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did"[49]. The administration most associated with these strict drug policies was led by President Ronald Reagan, which spanned 1981 to 1989. The fear of rising drug use was not irrational. However, the rhetoric used within the government created a far more socially impactful "moral panic" that one social group's perceived moral failings were harming society[50]. Drug policies tightened, became punishment based rather than rehabilitative, and between 1980 and 1993, the prison population tripled due to the mass incarceration of drug users[51]. One social group that was targeted during this period was women, but it differed from the Valium panic because of how race and gender intersected. Women were targeted during the Valium panic, but *minority* women were targeted during the crack epidemic. This distinction of intersectionality is necessary in understanding how these

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[48]"Drugs and Our Children: A White House Report," *Ladies' Home Journal,* May 1987, 112. https://www.proquest.com/magazines/drugs-our-children/docview/1922396782/se-2

[49] Dan Baum,"Legalize it All," *Harper's Magazine,* April 2016. https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/

[50]James E. Hawdon, "The Role of Presidential Rhetoric in the Creation of a Moral Panic: Reagan, Bush, and the War on Drugs." *Deviant Behavior* 22 (2001): 420, doi:10.1080/01639620152472813.

[51]Michael Tonry, "Race and the War on Drugs," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1994: Iss. 1, Article 4, (1994): 25. http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1994/iss1/4

social groups were controlled by the drug industry and their representation in the media. The climate of drug policy that was informed by this war on drugs carried on through the late 20th century and was amplified during the mid 1980's crack epidemic.

'Crack Mother' Icon of the mid 1980s to 1990s

After the Valium panic of the 1970s and concurrent war on drugs, another crisis began sweeping through America. September 5th, 1989, George H.W Bush held up a bag of crack cocaine seized by undercover agents and described it as the "greatest domestic threat facing our nation"[52]. He went into detail on the government's plan for assisting in this epidemic: harsher sentences for both dealers and casual users. More policing, more punishment, more imprisonment. There were stark differences between the perception of drug users during the Valium panic and crack epidemic, namely because of the primarily affected demographics. Wealthy, white women were the main victims of the overprescription of Valium, whereas impoverished, black and Hispanic women were disproportionately vilified during the crack epidemic. The intersection of race and gender that caused such drastic differences in how these women were perceived. Despite drug policies more negatively affecting low income neighborhoods and marginalized groups, the abuse of crack cocaine was viewed as a cause of social turmoil rather than a symptom[53]. Unlike in the Valium epidemic where criticism was directed towards pharmaceutical industries, blame during the crack epidemic was assigned to black and Hispanic crack using women. Pre-existing racial biases during the war on drugs remain a major focus of study in this topic due to the role that the government and media played

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[52]George H. W Bush, "Address on National Drug Policy." Video, September 5, 1989. C-SPAN. https://www.c-span.org/video/?8921-1/president-bush-address-national-drug-policy&start=44.
[53]Drew Humphries, "Crack Mothers at 6, Prime Time News, Crack/Cocaine, and Women." *Violence Against Women 4*, no. 1 (1998): 46. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801298004001004

in writing the popular narrative surrounding drug use. One of these significant narratives spread was that of the irresponsible and immoral 'crack mother'. This narrative entirely contradicts the previously held sentiment of the 1950s that mood-altering, however legal, psychostimulants like pep pills, and tranquilizers such as Valium, were used as a tool for mothers.

Crack is a form of smokable cocaine that boomed in popularity during the later half of the 20th century. Despite the nearly identical chemical similarities between crack and cocaine, the two substances held vastly differing social perceptions. The drug began circulating around middle class, white cocaine users, but it was not until the drug began affecting low income people of color in the mid 1980s that the DEA saw crack as a threat[54]. In 1986, the Reagan administration passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which significantly changed how we policed drug users. Under this act, five grams of crack cocaine were weighed equally against five hundred grams of powder cocaine, both receiving a five year minimum sentence[55]. Media covered issues surrounding crack heavily, fanning the flames of the moral panic. In the news, crack was "the nightmare with no end", that destroyed the prison system and risked the safety of their children[56]. Crack was analogous with prostitution, murder, and gangs. In 1986, 3% of Americans saw crack cocaine as a national threat, but by 1989, it jumped to 64%[57]. Through legislation and media it was clear that the war on drugs number one enemy was crack cocaine. Rates of usage did not differ substantially across races, but rates of conviction suggested

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[54] Mona Lynch and Marisa Omori, "Crack as Proxy: Aggressive Federal Drug Prosecutions and the Production of Black–White Racial Inequality." *Law & Society* 52 (2018): 781. https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12348

[55]Lynch and Omori, "Crack as Proxy," 776.

[56]Timothy Egan, "War on Crack Retreats, Still Taking Prisoners," *New York Times,* February 28, 1999. https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/war-on-crack-retreats-still-taking-prisoners/docview/110094454/se-2

[57]Donna M. Hartman, and Andrew Golub. "The Social Construction of the Crack Epidemic in the Print Media." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 31 (1999): 424. doi:10.1080/02791072.1999.10471772.

otherwise[58]. By 1992, 91% of those convicted on charges relating to crack cocaine were black[59]. These extreme rates of targeted convictions and wrongful association of minorities with the drug influenced how the crack epidemic was perceived by the American public. Instead of understanding the social causes of the epidemic, like feminists' response to the Valium panic, or being sympathetic to the idea that anyone, even a first lady, could be victimized, perception of women during the crack epidemic was negative and racially motivated.

Dr. Ira Chasnoff of Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago was among the first doctors to study the effects of crack and cocaine usage on fetuses[60]. In his 1985 study of 23 women's use of cocaine during pregnancy, the findings were relatively small. The results were released to the public because, despite lack of significant results, they were "of such consequence, and the cocaine problem [was] so bad"[61]. Of course, drug use while pregnant was harmful for the fetus– but not any more so than the far more common cigarette and alcohol consumption, of which all women of each group in Chasnoff's study were using while pregnant[62]. Dr. Claire Cole of Emory University was outspoken in her opposition to the media's interpretation of this study. She recognized the symptoms of prenatal cocaine use as consistent with any premature baby: slight tremors or shakiness, and smaller size at birth[63]. In a 1992 issue of *The Boston Globe,* Dr. Cole said in reference to the hysteria over this study,"crack is exotic

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[58]Lynch and Omori, "Crack as Proxy," 780.
[59]Lynch and Omori, "Crack as Proxy," 776.
[60]Kit R. Roane, "Race, the Media and the Myth of the 'Crack Baby'," Retro Report, 2013. Video, 10 minutes, 5 seconds.
https://whyy.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/race-media-and-the-myth-of-the-crack-baby-video/retro-report/
[61]"Coke and Pregnancy." *Newsday,* December 31, 1985, C11.
https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/1470069046/335659888E474439PQ/4?sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers.
[62]Ira A. Chasnoff, et al., "Cocaine Use in Pregnancy," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 313, no. 11 (1985): 666. https://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJM198509123131105
[63]Roane, "Race, the Media and the Myth," at 4:00.

and happening mostly in `marginal' populations among `bad people' who are not like `us'"[64]. Even Dr. Chasnoff, who had largely informed the media circus, later renounced much of the initial research. In his far more in depth 1998 study of 95 children who had been exposed as fetuses, by four to six years old, their mother's cocaine usage had no measurable effect on physical or mental development[65]. When it comes to reproductive health, it was not genuine medical concerns that informed public opinion– but rather timeless moral questions that served to question the capability of disadvantaged women. The idea of the 'crack mother' came from the popular notion that women who used illicit drugs were inherently bad mothers and put their children in danger. Even if the science used to substantiate these claims was inaccurate– or, at the very least, misrepresented– the media had taken what they wanted to hear and ran with it.

The crack epidemic brought increased concern from the public for the children of these so-called 'crack mothers'. The idea that a woman would put not just herself, but her potential child in harm's way by abusing drugs was more shocking and sensational than comparatively victimless male addiction. An article by *The Washington Post* insists that, " [...] crack is uniquely dangerous. Other drugs have plagued our society since the 1960s, but cocaine, and especially its derivative, crack, poses a threat to many more young children -- because mothers use it"[66]. In this way, the crack epidemic and Valium panic differed from other American drug crises– both were associated by the media with mothers. However, discourse around Valium rarely focused on the act of motherhood, especially not the capability of its users to succeed in it. Unlike the primarily

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[64]Ellen Goodman, "The Myth of Crack Babies," *The Boston Sunday Globe,* January 12, 1992. https://www.law.uci.edu/events/health-policy/pdfs/ClaireColes_MythCrack%20Babies-BostonGlobe.pdf

[65]Ira J. Chasnoff, et al. "Prenatal Exposure to Cocaine and Other Drugs: Outcome at Four to Six Years." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 846, 1 (1998): 314-328. doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.1998.tb09748.x

[66]Douglass J. Besharov, "Crack Babies, The Worst Threat is the Mom Herself," *The Washington Post,* August 5, 1989.https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/08/06/crack-babies-the-worst-threat-is-mom-herself/d984f0b2-7598-4dc1-9846-3418df3a5895/

white mothers in the 1970s, the "crack mother" depicted in the media was deplorable. Focus was drawn to rates of abandonment, like one claim that a mother was trying to sell her baby on the street for $5[67]. Stories like this caused people to wonder why these mothers were being allowed to maintain custody and demand justice for the children. The media's 'crack moms' were untrustworthy, and their child was thought to end up in foster care, costing taxpayers and condemning the child to further suffering. The 1990 *New York Times* article, "Crack Babies: A Sad Future", called people to reminisce on the "good old days, when the smallest babies were two pounds, when fetal alcohol syndrome and infant heroin addiction seemed the worst cases. Two percent of the babies went from the hospital directly to a foster home", then went on to claim, "The figure is now 15 percent. The reason is crack"[68]. This sort of rhetoric points back to Drew Humpheries' assertion in her book, *Crack Mothers: Pregnancy, Drugs, and the Media,* that crack was framed as a cause of social turmoil rather than a product of it[69]. In "Crack Babies: A Sad Future", the author was explicit about whose drug use and ability to mother was being called to question, having said in reference to mothers admitting to drug use while pregnant, "virtually all were black or Hispanic"[70]. This perception was in stark contrast to the lack of blame or probing of maternal capability held against white women during the Valium panic. The blame put on minority women extended past social scrutiny and into legal jurisdiction. Between 1988 and 1994, an estimated 160 women were prosecuted in court and many more had their character called to question[71].

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[67]"Mission is haven for babies in need," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* Dec 11, 1989, 1C. https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/december-11-1989-page-32-136/docview/1853871598/se-2.

[68]Anna Quindlen, "Crack Babies: A Sad Future," *Arizona Republic,* October 12, 1990, A15. https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/1934906458/8B38282A1B05474BPQ/11?sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers

[69]Humphries, "Crack Mothers at 6," 46.

[70]Quindlen, "Crack Babies."

[71]Humphries, "Crack Mothers at 6," 46.

The myth of the ‘crack baby’ led to a call for mothers to be criminally tried for neglect, child abuse, and murder. By 1987, Dr. Chasnoff’s study had made such huge waves in society that he was consulted by authorities in a case to charge an 18 year old mother for her child’s death after nursing the baby with crack in her system[72]. In 1989, at least two mothers were convicted of distributing drugs to their fetuses via umbilical cord[73]. To criminalize drug use among pregnant women was not a feasible pursuit. If they claimed that using crack while pregnant was fetal endangerment, it opened the door for women who smoke, drink, or go against doctors direct orders to be tried for a similar crime. Policing women’s bodies while pregnant was too open ended, so more preventative measures were needed to prevent the birth of ‘crack babies’. By the mid 1990s, this shift came in the form of programs that pushed sterilization on low income women. In 1997, Barabara Harris began hanging flyers in low income neighborhoods of Los Angeles with remarks such as, "Don't let your pregnancy get in the way of your drug addiction: Get birth control, get $200!"[74]. She soon partnered with the non-profit organization, Children Requiring a Caring Kommunity (CRACK), and extended their efforts in major cities across the country. CRACK paid around 3000 women $200-$300 for long term contraceptives or permanent sterilization, with most of these procedures taking place in the late 1990’s[75]. News of this program varied as some focused on the racial aspects of CRACK’s coercion, and others praised the efforts, with one 1999 newspaper saying, “Of course Harris has

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[72]“Infants Poisoned By Cocaine in Mother’s Milk.” *The Hartford Courant,* December 7, 1987, C11. https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/1081009052/73B89B04FFF04215PQ/20?sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers

[73]“Jail for Crack Moms?” *The Christian Science Monitor,* October 25, 1989, 20. https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/513055899/4DD2731C03B8407CPQ/1?sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers

[74]Erika Derkas, “"Don't Let Your Pregnancy Get in the Way of Your Drug Addiction": CRACK and the Ideological Construction of Addicted Women.” *Social Justice* 38, no. 3 (2011): 125. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41940951

[75]Derkas, ”Don't Let Your Pregnancy Get in the Way of Your Drug Addiction,“126.

critics. Jesus Christ had critics"[76]. Following the rise of prescription pills in the 1950s to 1970s, concern was garnered for the possible birth defects that could come from prescription drug abuse. However, the coercion of women to limit their reproductive abilities and baseless vilification was unique to the epidemic that primarily affected poor women of color.

Crack cocaine, like Valium, was used as a form of social control over the body and rights of women. In the case of 1950s-1960s prescription drug abuse, women who faced mental health issues because of their expected role as a housewife were given powerful mood-altering pills– barbiturates, amphetamines, and the "safer" tranquilizers– to keep them suspended in an unequal social standing. They were believed to be inherently mentally ill because of their "lesser" gender and subjected to irresponsible treatment by the psychopharmacology industry. During the crack epidemic, minorities of all genders were controlled by government regulation and law enforcement. The felony five year minimum sentence of one person may have meant the inability to put food on the table or pay for higher education with an impact on the family that extends far past five years. Felon disenfranchisement meant that in many states, those arrested on charges for crack were unable to vote from prison or after their sentence had been served. Black and Hispanic voters have been a Democratic stronghold and voter suppression by means of mass incarceration was a speculated motive of Republican politicians. In the year 2000, George W. Bush narrowly won the election and it has been debated that he would not have if felons were given the right to vote[77]. Minority women experienced both the oppression of their race and of their gender in a unique experience of discrimination. Organizations like CRACK and medical

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[76]Kathleen Parker, "Yes, C.R.A.C.K. 'Bribes' Addicts to Change Their Lives," *Sun Sentinel,* July 31, 1991. https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/388126622/abstract/946135306263412CPQ/1?accountid=14270&sourcetype=Newspapers

[77]George Brooks, "Felon Disenfranchisement: Law, History, Policy, and Politics," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 32, no. 5 (2005): 851. https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ulj/vol32/iss5/3

studies such as Dr. Ira Chasnoff's research on crack babies questioned these women's ability to mother, effectively debating whether they deserved the right to reproduce. They experienced aspects of discrimination during the crack epidemic that neither white women nor minority men faced during these drug crises.

Conclusion

Following the rise of prescription pills in the 1950s, outspoken support for the women suffering addiction came from all sides. Feminist media claimed drugs to be a means of suppressing women in the home, and popular media– including the first lady– supported the effort to educate women on addiction and restrict the pharmaceutical companies that allowed the epidemic to happen. This reception came widely from the fact that it was wealthy, white women who had access to prescription pills, and were the most likely to become addicted. While the Valium panic of the 1970s shows a major turn in how social issues among middle-upper class women were addressed, it was forgotten largely due to the distinctions made between legal and illegal drug use. The war on drugs showed a rise in racial discrimination by associating primarily black and Hispanic people living in low-income neighborhoods with 'unforgivable' drug use, and an increased fear that 'innocent, white children' would be put in danger. It's this cultural backdrop that informed the public's perception of 'crack mothers'.

While the societal sympathy for mothers addicted to Valium was justified, the same could not be said for the lack of sympathy towards 'crack mothers'. The perception of women during these epidemics shows us how recognizing the intersection of gender, race, and class in social issues are important in building a fully developed women's history in America. The history of drug use in our country is fraught with racial subtext and the building of harmful stereotypes that

permeate society today. The ongoing opioid crisis sweeping our nation is not a new phenomenon, as these drug crises have continually plagued America since the growth of the commercial pharmaceutical industry in the 1950s with Miltown. We are watching these epidemics grow larger, deadlier, and more divisive every year. Drugs have played a significant role in the suppression of social groups as evident through the practices of psychopharmaceuticals towards housewives in the 1950s and the vilification and sterilization of black and Hispanic mothers in the 1980s to 1990s.

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