

TrustTalk podcast Interview Carl Hart

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Voice-Over: Welcome to TrustTalk. Today's guest is Carl Hart, professor of neuroscience at Columbia University in New York. His research concentrates around neuropsychopharmacology, the study of the neurological and behavioural effects of drugs on people. He argues that the dangers of recreational drug use have been wildly overstated. In his latest book, "Drug Use for Grown-Ups", he advocates a more realistic image of the typical drug user. Can we trust the people who regulate drugs and people's drug-taking to do the right thing in order to keep people safe? In his view, we cannot. Your host today, Severin de Wit

Podcast Host: Carl, welcome at the TrustTalk podcast.

Carl Hart: Thank you for having me.

Podcast Host: I have to admit that preparing for this interview feels a lot different than most of the previous 34 interviews I did before. As trust is the central theme of this podcast, most subjects have a clear relation with trust, talking about trust in the military, in corporate leaders, in digital security, and so on. But bringing trust in relation to drugs requires some brain gymnastics, at least on my side. So how would you define the role of drugs in relation to trust?

Carl Hart: I'm kind of confused, I don't understand why it would be any different than those other subjects when you when it comes to drugs, because we think about the people who regulate drugs or regulate people's drug-taking. The question becomes, do we trust them to do the right thing in order to keep people safe and the way things are happening around the world? It's a resounding no. We don't trust those people.

Podcast Host: In your book "Drug Use for Grown-Ups", you wrote that you advocate a more realistic image of the typical drug user, a responsible professional who happens to use drugs in his pursuit of happiness. But even responsible people in their pursuit of happiness often make the wrong decisions. Is there something like a responsible use of drugs?

Carl Hart: Of course, I don't understand when you say that even responsible people in the pursuit of happiness often make the wrong decisions. I don't know, I don't think that's true. I think that humans, of course, we make mistakes, but when you say often that becomes that's that's a question. Let's think about people pursuing pleasure with sexual activity when they decide on pursuing a mate. Sometimes we make the wrong decision, but often we make a decision that we're happy with.

Podcast Host: I rephrase the question. It is hard to deny that even in a country like ours, The Netherlands, where we have a relaxed view on soft drugs, drugs are often associated with the wrong type of persons, with criminality, which we do not condone.

Carl Hart: Well, I think you're conflating too many things. I think you should maybe get out a more precise question because when we think about hard drugs versus soft drugs, that's an artificial distinction. That's not a real distinction based on pharmacology or anything of that nature. So that's a problem. And then when we think about illegal drugs versus legal drugs, we think about the fact that the market, the market is not regulated, therefore leaving it open to people who may not be the most scrupulous individuals. But that's an issue related to back to trust. Do we trust our officials to regulate these drugs properly? And that said that, no, because they haven't. And so that's a by-product of them not regulating the market, not the drugs themselves. So there are a number of issues that we have to disentangle to more precisely get to the issue that most people are concerned with.

Podcast Host: So what dangers do you see in vilifying drug users? You give the example of the image moviemakers present of the typical drug user.

Carl Hart: Yeah, well, we run the risk of getting it wrong. For example, if we are vilifying a group of people who use heroin or use MDMA, now we run the risk of not serving that population well by thinking, for example, that these people are experiencing problems because of their drug use, when in fact they may be experiencing problems because of the lack of, I don't know, drug-using equipment, some people may use the drug intravenously and then so they don't have proper equipment, and then that causes them to have blood borne illnesses that they pass on to other people in the society, but again, by vilifying them, we fail as a society to step in

to make sure that they had the proper equipment and then, therefore, helping to keep the society safer, the broader society safer.

Podcast Host: On Twitter, you once wrote 70 to 90 percent of people who use even the most vilified drugs are not addicts. These people pay their bills, they look after their health, take care of their families, as well as other responsibilities. They are professionals and more, they are your family, they are you, me.

Carl Hart: Yes, I don't only write that in on Twitter, the evidence, the empirical evidence shows that I published that in peer-reviewed papers, other people have published this as well, this is based on epidemiological data that has been collected time and time again for the past several decades.

Podcast Host: You are a scientist, your field of expertise is neuroscience, so like you said, we may assume your conviction comes from scientific research, yet you also have used heroin yourself, so you also rely on your own experiences. Let's start with the scientific base for the idea that drugs are not always harmful or even lead to criminal behaviour.

Carl Hart: Yeah, I mean, you point out that I've used heroin. I think you do so because heroin is the most sexy drug, and it's one of these things that people do in order to get clickbait and so forth, but not to really get at the issue. I also have used marijuana, MDMA, cocaine, a wide range of drugs, all of the drugs that I've studied in the lab. I have also have experience with, and so it's in an effort to better understand the compounds that are studied and also to help to demystify this notion of what a drug user looks like. So please make sure you understand that you're not contributing to the nonsense and to the noise that's in the public by highlighting the fact that I have used heroin.

Podcast Host: No, of course not. But I want to be honest towards our listeners in the Netherlands and in Europe who may not know you yet or not know you as I think they should know you. And I think rather than you being a scientist, you also have practical experience in that sense. You are not your typical scientist, are you?

Carl Hart: No, I think I am, you know, I am a typical drug scientist. It's just that, well, I'm more honest about it. There are a number of people who have used these drugs and they are dishonest about it or they're in the closet, and that's part of the call of the new book. One of the reasons that I shared my drug use history in the book was to encourage other scientists, other responsible people, people who we deem responsible in our society to get out of the closet, to be more honest and stop behaving like children around this subject. So I think about when we think about the gay and lesbian community when people got out of the closet so people could see these folks as just like individuals in their community and who are deserving of human rights protections, just like everyone else.

Podcast Host: So let's turn on to the criminalization of drugs. Whichever way you look at it, many will not trust drugs because they are confronted with neighbourhoods where crime is rampant, where drug bosses disrupt society. In our country, a lawyer and a journalist who represented a witness in a drug cartel case, have been murdered. The suspect, its perpetrator, is being prosecuted for drug-related offenses in one of the largest criminal cases ever brought to trial in the Netherlands. Many fear in this country at least, Italian mafia situations. What's your take on this?

Carl Hart: Well, you just gave an extreme example. We can think of an extreme example for a wide range of things. I mean, if someone is killed, obviously that's not a good situation. But that's an aberration. And then if we're dealing with aberrations, some situation that is at the extreme end, but not really going to get at any problems that we're trying to solve. I don't understand the purpose of that story. That's that anecdote. I'm having trouble to understand the purpose of that. Maybe you can help clarify

Podcast Host: The purpose of my question is to point out that I would think that many people listening to this podcast will associate drugs, at least not immediately, with what you call the responsible drug user, but rather the use of drugs that leads to criminalization. I realize that you are a very strong proponent of the view that it is the exception rather than the rule, but it is hard to deny that in the world, as we are in, that's the image that we are confronted with and I appreciate it, that's one of the reasons why we're having this conversation, that from a scientific point of view, that may be the wrong way of looking at it.

Carl Hart: Yeah, that is the wrong way of looking at it. But let's just say people are concerned about, I don't know, people who sell drugs illegally. They worry that those people may engage in some abhorrent behaviours, like killing people. We have laws against that sort of thing, number one and number two, that's a pure function of having drugs be illegal. If drugs were legally regulated, then you wouldn't have those kinds of issues where someone who sold drugs or what have you is fighting for territory or they're on trial for doing so illegally and now they kill someone. So that's a function of how we are banning these substances and not regulating them.

Podcast Host: In many European countries, not least in my country, the Netherlands, a lot of people wonder whether the legalization of certain drugs could be the ultimate solution to prevent a lot of drug-related societal problems. Given what you just said, I assume you are a vocal defender of that view.

Carl Hart: Yes, no, I think that legal regulation certainly would take care of a lot of problems. It would certainly take care of having drug adulterants be introduced into the model, into the market where people die from contaminated drugs. It would also deal with the issue of the legality of the sales and what regulates people who actually sell the drugs. So yeah, I don't think of, I don't think it would be a panacea for problems that are in a society. And so that's one of the things we have to be careful about, because if you regulate drugs, then you also now you have a different set of problems, and those problems, of course, are common to all human endeavour. And so I don't want people to think that all of a sudden all your problems go away. That's not how the world works when humans are involved.

Podcast Host: Let's talk about the elephant in the room. Drugs are addictive. There is no denial of that. Is there?

Carl Hart: No, drugs certainly can be addictive, that's absolutely true. Just like sexual behaviour, just like some types of food. I mean, there are a number of things that activities in which humans engage can be addictive, but it's important for people to understand that drug addiction itself has very little to do with drugs. You quoted the stat earlier, where we have 70 to 90 percent of the people who use drugs, they aren't addicted. When you have the vast majority of drug users of any drug not becoming addicted, then that tells you have to look beyond the

drug to figure out where the addiction problem is because it doesn't lie in the drug only, or the drug itself. It's it has to do with a number of psychosocial barriers, variables and a whole range of other issues, and we tend to stop at the drug.

Podcast Host: When talking about addictiveness, I looked into the list of the W.H.O. of the 10 most addictive substance. As it turns out, tobacco is on the third place. Compared to drug use, society looks quite different to drug use than the use of tobacco. Or isn't this a fair comparison?

Carl Hart: Yeah. So the tobacco issue has a long history, and so people who have to be careful again to disentangle the issues. When you think about tobacco, we oftentimes think about how the tobacco industry misled the public for so many years. They lied about the addictive potential of their substance. They lied about the cancer-producing potential of their substance. So they misled the public. And so the public has a right to be upset with the tobacco companies and distrustful of the tobacco companies. So that's absolutely true. But on the other hand, the question becomes should the public have the right also to smoke tobacco cigarettes? And the answer for me is, of course. And so we need companies, the people who sell the products to be honest about their products so that the consumer is fully informed. We have alcohol in our society. That's legal. Again, we need the alcohol producers to be honest with the consumers. So the consumers have all of the information now they can make their decision with this information. And the same can be true with those other drugs where the producers provide all of the information about the addictive potential about any other sort of potential harms related to their substance. And now the public can make an informed decision of whether or not to indulge.

Podcast Host: The Drug Policy Alliance in the United States, I'm sure you are familiar with that organization, and I'm quoting them, "the drug war has produced profoundly unequal outcomes across racial groups, manifested through racial discrimination by law enforcement and disproportionate drug war misery suffered by communities of colour. Would you agree with that?

Carl Hart: Yeah, but I go even further, so I was once served on the board of directors for the Drug Policy Alliance, so I'm very familiar with their work, but the Drug Policy Alliance focuses primarily in the U.S., so when you broaden your view and you look around the globe, drug

policy around the globe is used in order to subjugate outgroups, poor people, people who are different in some conspicuous way. And so any society where a group is struggling, you can believe drug policy is being used in order to further the marginalization of that group. So whether it's based on race, whether it's based on class, whether it's based on religion, whether it's based on some conspicuous characteristic of the drug policy is more often than not being used to participate in the subjugation of that group.

Podcast Host: In your latest book, as well as in TED talks and other interviews, you have been making your point about drug use, which let me say is not the mainstream view at this moment. Don't you have sometimes the feel that you are carrying water to the sea?

Carl Hart: You know, in the U.S., as you are well aware, the Dutch, we had slavery in our country. And so there were people who were fighting to ban slavery and they were fighting an uphill battle very much like my own self. But it's really simple to me. The position that I advocate is that adults should have the right to live their life as they see fit, so long as they don't prevent others from doing the same. So it's just a matter of this is a basic human right. And whether we're talking about engaging in drug-taking behaviour, whether we're talking about driving an automobile, whether we're talking about engaging in sexual behaviour, responsible people who are adults should be able to live their lives as they see fit. With that caveat, of course, of not preventing others from doing the same. This is very simple, but we make it more complicated.

Podcast Host: I'm sure that at your university, you must draw full classes of students who are eager to hear your views on this subject. Is that right?

Carl Hart: I do and you know, the major thing that I try to teach them is that it's not so important what my views are, it's more important to learn how to think. And so I try to show them how we arrive at this position. We look at all of the evidence, we look at the science, we look at the political science, we look at the sociology neurobiology and we see where there are inconsistencies for what we're currently doing and we draw the parallels for how we regulate it, the behaviour of groups in the past. And so I hope that this exercise helps them to be able to identify when we are wrongly subjugated and vilifying groups and so they can stand up and say, hey, this is wrong. That's what I hope, more than anything. So the subject of drugs is not so

important, it's more important that they learn how to think and learn how I did, how to identify when we are behaving inconsistent with the principles that we say we espouse or the principles we say that we live by.

Podcast Host: Where do you think your field of science, the neuroscience, is heading to in your field?

Carl Hart: Yeah, that's a really difficult question. One of the things about neuroscience is that even when we get it wrong in terms of drugs, we still learn a whole lot about how the brain works. And so that's one of the things that I'm really encouraged by. Like, for example, when we think about drugs, we've learned a lot about Parkinson's disease by studying drugs. And so I'm still excited by neuroscience, all of the possibilities and I, but I also go into neuroscience with my eyes open. Sometimes we get it wrong because this is a human activity and humans are fallible and this is no different. But because we get it wrong doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep trying.

Podcast Host: I wish you good luck with that and lots of success. Thank you very much for being our guest today, Carl, and have a nice day in Geneva.

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