Antecedents of Adolescent Initiation into Stages of Drug Use: A Developmental Analysis

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Received May 17, 1977

The social psychological antecedents of entry into three sequential stages of adolescent drug use, hard liquor, marihuana, and other illicit drugs, are examined in a cohort of high school students in which the population at risk for initiation into each stage could be clearly specified. The analyses are based on a two-wave panel sample of New York State public secondary students and subsamples of matched adolescent–parent and adolescent–best schoolfriend dyads. Each of four clusters of predictor variables, parental influences, peer influences, adolescent involvement in various behaviors, and adolescent beliefs and values, and single predictors within each cluster assume differential importance for each stage of drug behavior. Prior involvement in a variety of activities, such as minor delinquency and use of cigarettes, beer, and wine are most important for hard liquor use. Adolescents' beliefs and values favorable to the use of marihuana and association with marihuana-using peers are the strongest.

This research is supported by Grant DA-00064 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and by the Center for Socio-Cultural Research on Drug Use of Columbia University.

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predictors of initiation into marihuana. Poor relations with parents, feelings of depression, and exposure to drug-using peers are most important for initiation into illicit drugs other than marihuana.

INTRODUCTION

The use of drugs by adolescents provides a unique opportunity for studying processes of socialization, whereby individuals learn values and behaviors. There are few well-studied examples of socialization, in part because its beginning and end-points are often difficult to define. Socialization occurs over time, is determined by a series of repeated interactions between an individual and others, and therefore is best studied by means of longitudinal analyses. Moreover, since interpersonal influences often originate from more than one person, information is needed about the various sources of influence as well as about the persons being influenced. Drug use is a behavior with a clear onset and involves the resolution of conflicting social influences. To study it effectively, we have obtained independent data from the two major sources of influence in adolescence, parents and peers, and have assessed the impact of these interpersonal influences over time.

A conceptualization of drug behavior as involving clear-cut stages underlies our analyses and defines a developmental approach for which a longitudinal research design is particularly well suited. Stages in adolescent drug behavior were established in earlier analyses where we found that very few adolescents who had used drugs at a particular stage had not also used the drugs at the preceding stage(s) (Kandel, 1975c; Kandel and Faust, 1975). In advancing the notion of stages, we do not imply a causal sequence such that the use of a drug at a prior level causes the progression to the next level. Nor do we assume that, once started with the lowest drug, adolescents will necessarily progress through the entire sequence. These stages characterize the behaviors of particular cohorts studied in a particular sociocultural setting and at a particular historical period.

This paper focuses upon the antecedents of entry into three specific stages of drug use in a cohort of high school students followed over the course of one school year; namely, hard liquor, marihuana, and other illicit drugs. Within any one stage or drug class, experimental users do not necessarily continue their use, and continuing users can go on to exhibit various patterns of use culminating for some in abuse or compulsive use. In this article, the focus is on initiation, that is, the first experience with a particular drug. We show that different factors are related to initiation at different stages: prior involvement in minor delinquent activities are most important for hard liquor initiation; beliefs and values favorable to the use of marihuana and association with marihuana-