Factors that Lead to Substance Use Among College Students During Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

The purpose of this of this paper is to review the literature that exists on the reasons for the use of substances among emerging adults in college. The rates of substances use among emerging adults in college has been found to be significantly higher than emerging adults who do not attend college. This research is very important to understand why college students use substances so that measures can be taken to properly educate them on the effects of misuse of substances and prevent abuse, injury or death. This paper reviews six articles discussing the reasons for use of substances among college students. From the literature reviewed, the main reasons for substance use appears to be for academic purposes (such as studying) and socialization. These findings suggest a need for alternative methods of coping with the stress of academic performance for college students and proper education on the misuse of substances.

Emerging adulthood refers to the developmental life stage between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. Arnett (2000) proposed that this age range be given its own developmental stage. One of the characteristics observed during this life stage is an increase in the use of both legal and illegal substances. The term substances in this paper refers to legal drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana and tobacco, prescription drugs, as well as illicit drugs. Arnett (2005) theorizes that the reason for this increase may be the result of five key factors of emerging adulthood, including identity exploration, instability, self-focus, the feeling of being “in between” adulthood and adolescence and possibilities (p#). A study conducted by White, Labouvie and Papadaratsakis (2005) found that substance use appeared to spike during emerging adulthood, specifically in the setting of college (p. 296). This research also found that the use of substances for non-college students during emerging adulthood also increased, but not as drastically as those who attended college. There is little data, however, solely on non-college students’ use of substances during emerging adulthood. Lanier and Farley (2011) studied the factors that influence substance use in college and found that it may be to conform to social norms, particularly in certain social groups such as sororities and fraternities (p. 724). Lewis and Clemens (2008) found that if a student’s close friend engaged in the use of substances, they were very likely to influence the other student to use substances as well (p. 26). Other researchers, including Quintero, Peterson and Young (2006), Moore et. al. (2014) and Brandt, Taverna and Hallock (2014) conducted studies in which they found that college students used prescription drugs to help them study more efficiently, be more focused on school work and other academic purposes. From the current literature, it appears that the reason for the increase of substance use for college students during emerging adulthood may be due mainly to the general social acceptance of use and for purposes of academic achievement.

Arnett (2000) argues in his study that a new life stage has become more prevalent. He states in the beginning of his study that this period of life is not universal, but rather distinct to demographics, subjectivity and identity exploration (Arnett, 2000, p. 470). In regard to this life stage being distinct to demographics, Arnett explains that the majority of 12-17 year olds live at home, while the majority of 30 year olds live without their parents and are married with children (2000, p. 471). In between these periods though, Arnett (2000) has found that many people experience a time of relative instability, moving frequently, sometimes moving back home and then out again, or living in a dorm or Greek housing at a university. Arnett also found in his study that individuals in this age period (18-25) describe themselves as neither adolescents nor adults. This is because while they may have obtained some qualities to be considered self-sufficient, but others, such as financial stability and marriage and children, are not (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). The last distinct characteristic of Arnett’s emergent adulthood is identity exploration. During the proposed period of emergent adulthood, individuals have the greatest opportunity to explore their identity in love, work and worldviews (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Individuals at this age have much more serious romantic relationships than adolescents and may include cohabitation. The majority of individuals also have jobs while in school that are unrelated to future careers (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Individuals who are able to attend a higher education institution experience changes in worldviews as well. Education allows them to explore a variety of worldviews, so they are likely to go through changes in personal worldviews during this time (Arnett, 2000, p. 474).

Arnett (2005) theorizes on the possible factors of emerging adulthood that he believes may cater to an increase in the frequency of substance use during this developmental period. In his theory, Arnett proposes five characteristics of emerging adulthood that are key parts of this life stage, including identity exploration, instability, self-focus, the feeling of being “in between” adulthood and adolescence and possibilities (Citation from Arnett 2000 needed). Arnett (2005) argues that identity exploration may contribute to increased substance use during emerging adulthood for two reasons. The first is that emerging adults may desire to gain a wide range of experiences during this time period, including substance use, before they can fully consider themselves adults (p. 240). The second reason Arnett (2005) proposes is that for many emerging adults, identity exploration may be a particularly stressful event, resulting in the use of substances to relieve this stress (p. 240). Instability during emerging adulthood may also contribute to the increased use of substances. Emerging adults frequently change their love relationships, jobs, educational status and residence during this time period (Arnett, 2005, p. 241). It is possible, Arnett argues, that the instability of this age may contribute to an increase in feelings of sadness and stress for emerging adults, causing them to turn to substances as self-medication (Arnett, 2005, p. 242). These factors seem to apply better to emerging adults who are specifically in college. Being in college allows for emerging adults to have the freedom to engage in experimentation in a variety of areas without having any major responsibilities, as they are often still dependent on their parents in many ways. Emerging adults who do not go to college, though, may be forced into more adult-like roles, such as jobs, earlier than their college-attending peers.

White, Labouvie and Papadaratsakis (2005) conducted a study comparing the use of alcohol, marijuana and cigarettes in college and non-college students. Data was collected from the Rutgers Health and Human Development Project (HHDP). Results showed that problems with alcohol use were higher with non-students than students (White, Labouvie & Papadaratsaki, 2005, p. 296). For students, use of alcohol increased more rapidly during the years of college attendance but then steeply dropped off after finishing school. Marijuana use showed similar results, as it was seen more frequently in the nonstudent category than with the college students (White, Labouvie & Papadaratsaki, 2005, p. 296). The study concluded by arguing that the transition out of high school, not necessarily the transition into college, gives rise to problems with substance abuse. The results of this study suggest a culture of substance use in college among emerging adults, but is restricted to the college atmosphere, as it drops off after graduation.

Lanier and Farley (2011) conducted a study attempting to determine risk factors associated with prescription drug misuse among college students, finding that it may be socially acceptable among certain social groups. Data was collected from sociology and criminology departments during the spring 2008 semester from a public southeastern university (Lanier & Farley, 2011, p. 723). Students were given an anonymous self-report survey with questions regarding behaviors related to drug and alcohol use. There was one question in the survey regarding a non-existent drug to eliminate the possibility providing false information (Lanier, 2011, p. 723). The total number of responses was 599. The overall rate of prescription drug use for nonmedical purposes in this study was 34% (Lanier, 2011, p. 725). Results of the study found that nonmedical use of prescription drugs was higher among males than females (40% compared to 28%) (Lanier, 2011, p. 724). Additionally, nonmedical use of prescription drugs was higher among members of the Greek system compared to those not affiliated with the Greek system (46% compared to 32%) (Lanier, 2011, p. 724). It was also found that students who use marijuana, binge drink and use other illegal drugs were significantly more likely to use prescription drugs (Lanier, 2011, p. 726). Poly-drug use was also found to be a significant indicator of prescription drug use (Lanier, 2011, p. 726). This study suggests that the use of substances in college may be more socially acceptable among specific groups. Although this study does not answer the question of why these groups may be more likely to use substances, it suggests that being a male student who is part of the Greek system may increase the likelihood of using substances.

Lewis and Clemens (2008) conducted a study investigating gender-specific norms compared to sociodemographic variables and how they influence the use of alcohol and marijuana and whether the gender-specific norms were different for the use of alcohol and marijuana. Data was collected from a university in the Southeast United States from 235 undergraduate students (Lewis & Clemens, 2008, p. 21). Students were given a questionnaire to complete, asking students to report how often they thought their closest friend of the same and opposite gender consumed alcohol in a week and how often their closest friend of the same and opposite gender consumed marijuana in the past month (Lewis & Clemens, 2008, pp. 22-23). Lewis and Clemens (2008) found that students were more likely to participate in drinking and marijuana consumption if their close friend also did (p. 26). This research also supports the idea that may promote the use of substances because it is a social norm.

Quintero, Peterson and Young (2006) conducted a qualitative study looking at the misuse of prescription drugs among college students and found that substances were used for self-medication, recreational purposes and academic purposes. The purpose of this study was to analyze the socio-cultural factors that influence the misuse of prescription drugs among college students. Data was collected from an exploratory study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and consists of 52 interviews with college students from a public university in the southwestern United States (p. 907). Results of the study found that the two most common types of drugs misused by students were narcotic analgesics, such as hydrocodone and oxycodone and benzodiazepines, such as diazepam and alprazolam (pp. 910-912). Three main categories of misuse were established: self-medication of physiological conditions, socio-recreational use and use for academic purposes (p. 912). It was also found that prescription drugs were much more socially acceptable among college students than other, illegal drugs (p. 914). This research supports the idea that substances are used during college mainly for social and academic reasons. There were also participants in this study who reported their reason for using substances to be for stress-management (p. 912). College may promote a culture of substance use among emerging adults for purposes of succeeding both academically and socially.

Moore et. al. (2014) conducted a study with the intention of determining patterns of drug use during periods of high and low stress among college students. Data was collected from undergraduate students at a private, Liberal Arts University in the Pacific Northwest. Three self-report surveys were to be completed. The first survey was taken by students at the start of the school year, which comprised of 627 respondents, the second was taken during midterms which included 468 responses, and the final survey was done during final exams, which included 400 responses (Moore, et. al., 2014, p. 988). Results of the study revealed an increase in the use of Adderall by four times from the start of the school year to midterm week (p. 989). Non-prescriptive use of drugs was three times higher during finals week compared to the first week of classes (p. 989). Chemical samples from wastewater were also collected from an on-campus sampling location that consisted of 476 undergraduate students (p. 989). The concentration of amphetamine in the wastewater was found to be three times higher during midterms week compared to the first week of classes. Amphetamine concentration was 1.5 times higher during finals week compared to the first week of classes (p. 990). The concentration of ritalinic acid was five times higher during midterms week and eight times higher during finals week compared to the first week of classes (Moore et. al., 2014, p. 990). It is very clear from this study that college students frequently turn to substances to enhance their academic abilities. By comparing the frequency of drug use from the first week to midterms and finals week, there is a strong implication of the substances being used for only academic purposes.

Brandt, Taverna and Hallock (2014) conducted a study investigating college students’ use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes, finding that stimulant use was typically associated with studying purposes whereas painkillers and tranquilizers were associated with socialization purposes. Data were collected from 303 undergraduate students from Skidmore College in New York (p. 273). Students were given a survey to complete, asking questions regarding which prescription drugs they had used and for what non-medical purposes they had used such substances (p. 273). Results of the study revealed that 36.8% of the participants had used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes. Of the types of prescription drugs used by participants, stimulants were found to be the most frequently used and were used mainly for studying purposes during midterms and final exams (Brandt, Taverna, Hallock, 2014, p. 274). They also found that the use of pain relievers and tranquilizers were more often associated with use for socialization purposes, whereas stimulant use was more frequently used for academic purposes (Brandt, Taverna, Hallock, 2014, p. 274). This study provides evidence for the existing drug culture among emerging adults in college. Substances are frequently used for the enhancement of academic ability and for socialization.

The existing research on the subject of substance use among emerging adults in college indicates that there may be a culture of use. Many of the findings reveal the reasons for substance use in college to be mainly for academic and studying uses and for socialization reasons. This research has many important implications, as measures may need to be taken in order to protect emerging adults as they enter into college. Although White, Labouvie and Papadaratsakis (2005) found in their research that the majority of college students will quit using substances once they graduate from college, Quintero, Peterson and Young (2006) found in their study that many college students will combine different kinds of drugs to achieve different effects. This kind of poly-drug misuse can lead to unintentional injury or death. It is important to acknowledge the culture of substance use in college to ensure that incoming college students are properly educated on the effects of different substances and their interactions with other drugs. The frequency of prescription drug use also has very significant implications. The ease of access to these drugs speaks to something profound about our society. Although these drugs are legal for medical purposes, many of them are highly addictive and easily abused and should not be so widely and easily prescribed and accessed by college students. Further research should be conducted on the effects of academic-related stress and use of substances, particularly those known for enhancing academic performance, such as Adderall and Ritalin. Perhaps the college environment places too much pressure on students to perform well, academically, causing them to turn to substances to help them succeed.

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