

Substance Use to Get In or Get Out? Examining Substance Use and Risk Taking Among At-Risk Youth

Aims:

Examine (1) how diverse offline and online social settings, influence substance use and risk behaviors, (2) how do underlying social needs, shape behavior in various contexts, and (3) whether substance use and risk-taking are responses to marginalization or methods of connecting to peer group.

Theoretical background:

Adolescence is a formative period of life in which adolescents face various developmental tasks related to autonomy, identity formation, and the formation of social relationships. Although these tasks affect all adolescents, there are individual differences in the extent to which adolescents accomplish these tasks (Crone & Dahl, 2012). Specifically, marginalized adolescents, or those at risk of being marginalized within their peer group, may be more likely to develop problem behaviors related to substance use, risk-taking, and mental health problems. In the context of this project, (risk of) marginalization includes any way in which people or groups of people are placed outside of a social group, e.g., through social rejection/exclusion, neglect, or victimization. Marginalized adolescents, including sexually and gender minoritized adolescents, exhibit higher rates of mental health issues and substance use (Fish et al., 2020; Mereish, 2019).

Marginalized adolescents may turn to substance use as self-medication for mental health issues caused by social marginalization (Bos et al., 2016; Felner et al., 2021). Alternatively, marginalized adolescents might use substances to conform to norms within the peer groups through social influence processes (Boyle et al., 2020; Henneberger et al., 2020). This idea resonates with Moffitt's dual taxonomy of adolescent risk behaviors, which suggests that risk behaviors, including substance use, are often imitated and socially rewarded in terms of peer group status because these behaviors indicate "maturity" (Moffitt, 1993).

To shed more light on these divergent explanations, the aim of this project is to examine the role of coping, social dynamics, and social norms in substance use and risk behaviors among (at-risk) marginalized adolescents. Furthermore, to understand these dynamics, it is important to consider the diversity of peer groups to which adolescents belong. Previous work has largely focused on social relationships and norms within the school context to understand substance use and risk behaviors (Laurson & Veenstra, 2021), but for many adolescents, and especially those who are (at-risk for) being marginalized, out-of-school contexts, including online contexts, may provide more rewarding peer groups and a better explanation for their substance use and risk behaviors.

Research design:

To address these questions, this project will use a mixed methods approach. First, in-depth interviews will be conducted that will provide more insight into the processes, mechanisms, and motivations that explain substance use and risk taking among marginalized adolescents (Felner et al., 2020). Second, the findings from the in-depth interviews will be used to design a quantitative study in which social relationships across peer contexts will be mapped using a combination of ego-network approaches, full-network approaches, and daily diaries. This will provide insight into the breadth of adolescents' social networks and their respective functions in meeting social needs.

Literature:

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Project initiators: Jelle Sijtsema (RUG), Wouter Kiekens (RUG), René, Veenstra (RUG)

Location: University of Groningen, Department of Sociology and Educational Sciences