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Best friends' interactions and substance use: The role of friend pressure and unsupervised co-deviancy



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ABSTRACT

Best friends exert a substantial influence on rising alcohol and marijuana use during adolescence. Two mechanisms occurring within friendship - friend pressure and unsupervised co-deviancy - may partially capture the way friends influence one another. The current study aims to: (1) examine the psychometric properties of a new instrument designed to assess pressure from a youth's best friend and unsupervised co-deviancy; (2) investigate the relative contribution of these processes to alcohol and marijuana use; and (3) determine whether gender moderates these associations. Data were collected through self-report questionnaires completed by 294 Canadian youths (62% female) across two time points (ages 15–16). Principal component analysis yielded a two-factor solution corresponding to friend pressure and unsupervised co-deviancy. Logistic regressions subsequently showed that unsupervised co-deviancy was predictive of an increase in marijuana use one year later. Neither process predicted an increase in alcohol use. Results did not differ as a function of gender.

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Initiation into alcohol and marijuana use often takes place during adolescence (Faulkner, Latulippe, Paquette, & Paré, 2011; Lanctôt, Bernard, & Le Blanc, 2002). From a prevention perspective, understanding the proximal factors associated with substance use initiation, maintenance and growth is crucial (Van Ryzin, Fosco & Dishion, 2012). Among these factors, the influence of friends is of primary concern for most researchers (Fujimoto & Valente, 2012; Urberg, Değirmencioglu, & Pilgrim, 1997). The main line of inquiry that remains underinvestigated in this field has to do with identifying the mechanisms through which this influence process operates within friendships. The current study addresses this specific issue by examining two potential mechanisms that have never been considered simultaneously in previous research, that is, friend pressure and unsupervised co-deviancy.

1. Friendship and substance use

Adolescents who use alcohol and marijuana tend to have friends who also use these substances (Gaughan, 2006; Poulin, Kiesner, Pedersen, & Dishion, 2011). This can be explained by at least two processes: (1) selection, wherein an adolescent chooses to form a friendship with a peer who already displays similar behaviours; and (2) influence (or socialization), referring to the tendency of adolescents to adopt the behaviours of those with whom they frequently interact (Kandel, 1978).

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Importantly, these two processes can only be disentangled using a longitudinal design whereby youths' behaviour and friendships are measured at multiple time points. Research suggests that both processes are at play; adolescents who use substances choose friends who also engage in substance use and, over the course of their friendship, these two friends will come to adopt increasingly similar behaviours, thus suggesting a mutual behavioural influence (Laursen et al., 2008). Moreover, longitudinal studies have shown that having a best friend who uses substances is one of the strongest predictors of adolescents' own subsequent use months and even years later (e.g., Fujimoto & Valente, 2012; Urberg et al., 1997). While these studies are very informative, they do not tell us much about the interactions that take place between these friends. In other words, what is going on in these friendships that can push adolescents to change their behaviour and increase their use of alcohol and/or marijuana?

Stemming from Bandura's (1980) social learning theory, the interactionist perspective mainly involves the study of the potential mechanisms at work within friendships. Bandura's theory deals with the substantial influence exerted by surrounding social agents on one's own behaviour. The interactionist perspective thus focuses on the development of antisocial and risky behaviour in the context of friendship. Moreover, according to this perspective, internal psychological processes are thought to be the result of a set of social processes operating between social partners (Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009). Bandura's main mechanisms of social learning (i.e., vicarious learning – observational learning of a target behaviour and its consequences – and modeling) exert a significant influence within dyadic peer relationships. Two microprocesses embedded in the interactionist perspective, referred to here as friend pressure and unsupervised co-deviancy, may be at play.

2. Friend pressure

Friend pressure is a subcategory of peer pressure referring to pressure to adopt a given behaviour exerted on a youth by a friend. For instance, some adolescents promote alcohol and drug use and pressure their friends into using these substances as well (Urberg, 1992). Such pressure within the friendship may be increased by loyalty to the friend (Warr, 2002) prompting the adolescent to adopt or maintain a deviant behaviour. Moreover, adolescents who are more concerned about the opinion of others have a greater tendency to engage in deviant behaviours (Young & Weerman, 2013) out of fear of ridicule (rejection) or to maintain their status within the group (Costello & Hope, 2016; Warr, 2002). Friends thus actively influence one another's behaviour (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000).

Pressure effects have predominantly been studied within the larger peer group. Berndt (1979) studied individuals' differential susceptibility to peer influence as well as how they perceive peer pressure. His work revealed that perceived constraint toward peer group conformity reaches a peak in mid-adolescence, from ages 15 to 16. Interestingly, this peak also corresponds to a documented rise in the frequency of minor deviant behaviour among youths (Berndt, 1979). Brown and colleagues (Brown, Clasen, & Eicher, 1986; Clasen & Brown, 1985) later developed a well-known and frequently employed instrument used to assess peer pressure: the *Peer Pressure Inventory* (PPI; 53 items). These researchers also observed that peer pressure to engage in antisocial behaviour increases between the ages of 12 and 16 before levelling off between the ages of 16 and 18. Finally, a study by Santor et al. (2000) using a shorter questionnaire (10 items) found peer pressure to be significantly associated with both risky behaviour and psychosocial issues during the adolescent years.

The phenomenon of peer pressure has mostly been examined within the larger peer group, without specifying which peer(s) were considered. Given the prominent role of a youth's best friend within the peer network during the adolescent years, we find it surprising that the effect of pressure from best friends on youths' own behaviour has rarely been investigated – with the exception of, for example, Allen, Porter, & McFarland, 2006; Laursen, Hafen, Kerr, & Stattin, 2012; McGloin, 2009.

3. Unsupervised co-deviancy

The adolescent years are marked by a growing need for autonomy, expressed through both a decrease in time shared with parents and an increase in time spent with peers (Brown & Larson, 2009). Youths also tend to consider this transitional period a favourable time to initiate substance use. This initiation mainly occurs within the friendship network (Reed & Rountree, 1997). Thus, parental monitoring of adolescent behaviour remains essential, although parents must also adapt to the growing need for autonomy expressed by youths. Previous studies have shown low parental monitoring to be associated with higher frequency of substance use during adolescence (Chilcoat & Anthony, 1996; Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004; Steinberg, Fletcher, & Darling, 1994). This relationship is partially explained by the increased risks of affiliation with substance-using peers when youths experience weak/no parental monitoring (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993; Dishion et al., 2004). It has often been reported that the initiation of marijuana use usually occurs with friends, when no adults are present (Reed & Rountree, 1997). Moreover, youths who are characterized as “deviant” are more likely to both seek and find themselves in unstructured and unsupervised contexts with their friends (Dishion et al., 2004; Hoeben & Weerman, 2016; Osgood, Wilson, O'malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). Osgood et al. (1996) found this type of environment to be associated with higher levels of heavy alcohol and marijuana use.

Within dyadic friendships, deviant behaviour may occur on a voluntary basis, with both friends prompting one another to engage in rule-breaking actions such as delinquency, drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana. This dynamic has been captured in previous studies and has been referred to as “deviancy training.” Deviancy training occurs when two friends mutually prompt one another to engage in rule-breaking behaviours by providing mutual positive reinforcement (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996). This influence process within the friendship increases the risk of substance use (Dishion &

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