



Personality, marijuana norms, and marijuana outcomes among college students



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined impulsivity, sensation seeking, hopelessness, and anxiety sensitivity.
- We examined marijuana descriptive norms, injunctive norms, and internalized norms.
- Marijuana norms fully/partially mediated personality-marijuana outcome associations.
- Internalized norms mediated the effects of impulsivity and sensation seeking.
- Normative beliefs could be targeted as part of personality-tailored interventions.

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ABSTRACT

Based on the high prevalence of marijuana use among college students, we examined distal and proximal antecedents to marijuana-related outcomes in this population. Specifically, we examined three marijuana-related perceptions (descriptive norms, injunctive norms, and internalization of college marijuana use culture) as potential mediators of the associations between four personality traits (impulsivity, sensation seeking, hopelessness, and anxiety sensitivity) and marijuana-related outcomes (marijuana use, negative marijuana-related consequences). In a large sample of college student marijuana users ($n = 2129$), our path analysis revealed marijuana-related perceptions to significantly mediate the associations between personality and marijuana-related outcomes. Specifically, internalization of college marijuana use culture mediated the effects of both impulsivity and sensation seeking on marijuana-related outcomes. Not only do our findings suggest the importance of distinct types of marijuana-related norms in predicting marijuana involvement, but also the possibility that such normative beliefs could be targeted as part of personality-tailored interventions.

1. Introduction

Marijuana use and risk for cannabis use disorder peaks around the college years (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2015). In fact, approximately 30% of college students report past year use of cannabis (Johnston, O'Malley, Miech, Bachman, & Schulenberg,

2015), which is a much higher frequency than the general population (10%, Hasin et al., 2015). College students are also at a significantly higher risk for cannabis use initiation compared to same-aged individuals not enrolled in college (Miech, Patrick, O'Malley, & Johnston, 2017). Consequently, it is important to identify risk factors that are associated with negative marijuana-related consequences in the college

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student population, including personality variables, marijuana-related perceptions, and marijuana use.

1.1. Personality traits

Personality traits are often theorized as distal antecedents to behavior (e.g., marijuana use and marijuana-related negative consequences) according to the Acquired Preparedness Model (Smith & Anderson, 2001), Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2011), and the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974) because they can influence individual beliefs or perceptions. A wide range of personality traits have been examined as putative antecedents to substance use outcomes including the Big Five personality traits (Terracciano, Löckenhoff, Crum, Bienvu, & Costa, 2008) and specific facets of impulsivity (Cyders & Smith, 2008; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). More specifically, marijuana use has been associated with impulsivity, sensation-seeking/high openness to experience, depression, and anxiety sensitivity, among others (Bonn-Miller, Zvolensky, & Bernstein, 2007; Feldstein Ewing, Filbey, Loughran, Chassin, & Piquero, 2015; Flory, Lynam, Milich, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2002; Fu et al., 2002). In the present study, we focus on four traits: a) impulsivity (reacting to internal/external influences without considering possible negative outcomes), b) sensation seeking (pursuing exciting/pleasurable activities), c) hopelessness (depressed affect), and d) anxiety sensitivity (fearing bodily sensations associated with arousal). Not only has each of these traits been shown to be associated with increased risk for substance use and/or associated problems (Hustad, Pearson, Neighbors, & Borsari, 2014; Pearson & Hustad, 2014; Woicik, Stewart, Pihl, & Conrod, 2009), but also they form the basis of multiple successful personality-targeted substance use interventions (e.g., Conrod, Castellanos-Ryan, & Mackie, 2011). To further inform the development of successful personality-targeted interventions, it is important to determine the factors that mediate the effects of personality traits on substance use outcomes. These mediators provide potential treatment targets specific to individuals who endorse one or more traits associated with marijuana use.

1.2. Marijuana-related norms

Marijuana-related perceptions can be viewed as proximal antecedents (i.e., putative mediators of the associations between personality and marijuana-related outcomes) by extending Cox and Klinger's (1988) motivational model of alcohol to marijuana use. As predicted by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2011) and the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974), distal personality variables are expected to influence actual behavior through proximal antecedents like descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms reflect the perceived prevalence, quantity, and/or frequency of substance use by others whereas injunctive norms reflect the extent to which one believes that others approve/disapprove of one's substance use (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). Descriptive and injunctive norms both predict substance use more broadly (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007) and marijuana use specifically (Neighbors, Geisner, & Lee, 2008).

There is growing evidence suggesting that norms-based interventions are missing a key type of normative beliefs: internalization of college marijuana use culture. Osberg et al. (2010) introduced a construct of alcohol perceptions about the role of drinking in the college experience, or internalization of college drinking culture, as assessed by the College Life Alcohol Salience Scale (CLASS). These perceptions regarding the relative importance of drinking in college appear to be correlated with personal alcohol use and negative consequences cross-sectionally (Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg, Insana, Eggert, & Billingsley, 2011) and prospectively (Moser, Pearson, Hustad, & Borsari, 2014; Osberg, Billingsley, Eggert, & Insana, 2012). Collectively, these findings suggest that this construct holds promise as a potential intervention

target in alcohol use research. Recently, a measure of internalization of college marijuana use culture was developed that demonstrated convergent validity with its associations with multiple marijuana-related outcomes (Pearson, Kholodkov, Gray, & Marijuana Outcomes Study Team, 2017).

1.3. Norms as mediators

Two studies most relevant to the present study examined alcohol-related perceptions (alcohol descriptive norms, alcohol injunctive norms, and internalization of college drinking culture) as possible mediators of the effects of personality on alcohol-related outcomes. Specifically, Hustad et al. (2014) found that internalization of college drinking culture was the most robust predictor of alcohol-related outcomes and the most robust mediator of the effects of personality (i.e., impulsivity, sensation seeking, anxiety sensitivity, and hopelessness) on alcohol use outcomes in a sample of incoming freshmen. Pearson and Hustad (2014) largely replicated these findings in a sample of mandated college students. Taken together, it appears that substance perceptions may in part explain how personality traits exert an effect on substance use outcomes.

1.4. Purpose of present study

The present study aimed to evaluate whether marijuana-related norms mediate the influence of personality traits on marijuana use and negative marijuana-related consequences. Specifically, we examined how four personality traits (impulsivity, sensation seeking, anxiety sensitivity, and hopelessness) related to three marijuana-related norms variables (descriptive norms, injunctive norms, and internalization of college marijuana use culture) and in turn marijuana-related outcomes (typical frequency of marijuana use and negative consequences from marijuana use) in a manner consistent with previous studies (Hustad et al., 2014; Pearson & Hustad, 2014). Consistent with these previous studies on internalization of college drinking culture, we hypothesized that a measure of internalization of college marijuana use culture will mediate the effects of sensation seeking and impulsivity on marijuana use outcomes. In addition, we hypothesized that internalization of college marijuana use culture will have a direct relationship on marijuana use frequency and marijuana-related negative outcomes after controlling for other variables (e.g., descriptive norms and injunctive norms).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

We recruited 8141 college students from Psychology Department Participant Pools at 11 different participating universities in 11 different states in the United States between fall 2015 and spring 2016 (for additional information, see Pearson, Liese, Dvorak, & Marijuana Outcomes Study Team, 2017). Participants provided informed consent prior to completing the survey online, and were provided with research participation credit as an incentive. Our analytic sample included 2129 college students who reported using marijuana in the past 30 days. The majority of the analytic sample was White, non-Hispanic (60.4%) or of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity (18.3%) were women (59.2%), and reported a mean age of 19.95 (SD = 3.66) years. This study was approved by the IRB at each participating institution.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marijuana consequences

Marijuana consequences in the past month were assessed using the 50-item Marijuana Consequences Questionnaire (MACQ; Simons, Dvorak, Merrill, & Read, 2012). All items (0 = no, 1 = yes) were

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