



Research paper

Worries about others' substance use—Differences between alcohol, cigarettes and illegal drugs?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 December 2016

Received in revised form 3 July 2017

Accepted 10 July 2017

Keywords:

Alcohol
Cigarette smoking
Illegal drugs
Harm to others
Worries

ABSTRACT

Background: While it is well documented that many experience harm from others' substance use, little is known about the psychological strain associated with others' use. The aims were: (1) to describe the prevalence of worries about others' alcohol, cigarette and illegal drug use, (2) whose substance use people worry about, (3) the overlap in worries, and (4) to examine how worries about others' use of each substance vary according to demographics, own substance use and experience of harm from others' use. **Methods:** A population survey was conducted among 16–64 year old Norwegians (N=1667). Respondents reported on worries about others' alcohol, cigarette and illegal drug use, measures of experiences of harm from others' use of the three substances, and own substance use. **Results:** Worries about others' drinking were most prevalent. Among those who worried, others' cigarette and illegal drug use caused more frequent worry. While worry about cigarette use was mostly associated with family members' use, worry about others' alcohol and illegal drug use more often concerned friends/acquaintances' use. About half worried about others' use of at least one substance. Across all three substances, experience of harm from others' substance use was most strongly related to worries. **Conclusion:** Worries about others' substance use are common and reflect the prevalence of use of the substances in the population. In sum, the findings suggest that worry about others' alcohol and illegal drug use is primarily related to acute harm while worry about others' cigarette smoking is more related to chronic harm.

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Background

Substance use causes a wide range of negative consequences, including harm to health and social problems (Babor et al., 2010; Nutt, King, Saulsburry, & Blakemore, 2007). While cigarette smoking and alcohol constitutes the largest problem in terms of the global burden of disease (Forouzanfar et al., 2016), social problems can to a larger extent be attributed to alcohol and illegal drug use (Nutt et al., 2007; Nutt, King, & Phillips, 2010; Van Amsterdam, Opperhuizen, & Koeter, 2010). Substance use does not only affect users, but can also harm others.

Some studies have mapped heavy drinkers in people's lives and to what extent their alcohol use has affected them negatively (e.g., Laslett et al., 2011; Ramstedt et al., 2016). However, most studies on harm from others' substance use have focused on concrete incidents of harm such as verbal or physical harm from others' drinking (Casswell, Harding, You, & Huckle, 2011; Laslett et al.,

2011; Lund, Moan, & Storrø, 2016; Mäkelä et al., 1999; Moan et al., 2015; Rossow & Hauge, 2004), being bothered by others' cigarette smoking (e.g., Sivri, Lazuras, Rodafinos, & Eiser, 2013) and having to call the police or seek professional help due to others' illegal drug use (Melberg et al., 2011).

In addition, substance use may cause worries for family and friends (Melberg et al., 2011; Orford, Copello, Velleman, & Templeton, 2010), which in extreme situations can result in psychological problems and reduced quality of life. For instance, in a study from New Zealand, frequent exposure to heavy drinkers was associated with lower health status and reduced personal wellbeing (Casswell, You, & Huckle, 2011). Similarly, an Australian study showed that identification of at least one heavy drinker in the respondents' social network of friends, family and co-workers was negatively associated with self-reported mental wellbeing and anxiety or depression (Ferris, Laslett, Livingston, Room, & Wilkinson, 2011). However, the psychological strain related to others' substance use, which represents an important factor when estimating the social costs of such use, has received little research attention.

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To our knowledge, no previous studies have examined which of the three substances – alcohol, cigarettes and illegal drugs – contribute to most worries among others than the substance user. In order to gain more knowledge about the “psychological costs” related to others’ substance use, identically phrased questions about worries about others’ use of alcohol, cigarettes and illegal drugs were included in a general population survey conducted in Norway in 2012. The questions were asked separately for each drug. This allows for a comparison of the prevalence of worries about others’ use of three different substances, and enable analyses on whose substance use people worry about, and on how prevalence of worries varies in subgroups of the population.

Prevalence of and overlap in worries about others’ substance use

Worries about others’ substance use may to some extent depend on the prevalence of substance use in the population. A recent population survey showed that during the past 12 months, 90% of 16–79 year old Norwegians had consumed alcohol while 14% and 9% reported being daily and occasional smokers, respectively. Among those aged 16–64 years, 3.4% had used cannabis the past 12 months (Bye, Amundsen, & Lund, 2013). Alcohol and illegal drugs are the most and least commonly used substances in Norway; it is therefore reasonable to expect that more people worry about others’ use of alcohol, and fewer about others’ use of illegal drugs. On the other hand, with respect to degree of worry, it might be that people worry more about use of substances they are unfamiliar with and choose not to expose themselves to (Lund et al., 2016). This reasoning is in line with risk perception research, i.e., consequences of risks that we choose to expose ourselves to, such as drinking alcohol, are perceived as less problematic than consequences of risks we are exposed to involuntarily (Slovic, 2000).

Persons perceived as significant others are more likely to have an impact on how people think and act than more distal relations (e.g., Ajzen, 1991). Accordingly, people are more likely to worry about partners and other family members’ substance use than that of strangers. Consistent with this, a previous study addressing harm from others’ illegal drug use revealed that having experienced harm from close relations, such as family or friends, is particularly likely to influence the tendency to worry about others’ substance use (e.g., Melberg et al., 2011). On the other hand, it is likely that people who have more friends/acquaintances who use substances may give more grounds to worry. Thus, it is not obvious whose substance use people worry most frequently about.

In addition to examining the prevalence of worries for each of the substances separately, it is of interest to examine whether there is an overlap of worries. Among those who worry, is there a general tendency to worry about others’ substance use in general (i.e., worry about all substances), or is there a tendency to worry about others’ use of one particular substance?

Correlates of worries

Past experience affects the way people perceive and evaluate situations they are faced with (e.g., Conner & Armitage, 1998; Ouellette & Wood, 1998). In this context, experienced harm from others’ substance use is likely to be associated with the extent of worries about others’ substance use.

Worries about others’ substance use may also vary according to the respondent’s own substance use. On the one hand, persons who frequently use substances often do so with others (Bye et al., 2013). Moreover, with respect to alcohol use more frequent risky drinkers report having a problematic drinker within their immediate social network (i.e., household member, family, friends, or other known people whom the respondent considered to be a

“fairly heavy drinker”, or someone who drinks a lot sometimes) than did non-risky drinkers (Ferris, Devaney, Davis, & Mazerolle, 2016). In turn, this may increase the likelihood of experiencing situations that cause worries about others’ substance use. On the other hand, people who frequently use these substances may have a higher tolerance for others’ substance use and a higher threshold for worrying about others’ use. Consistent with this reasoning, the tolerance for alcohol use in Norway has increased in accordance with an increase in consumption (Nordlund, 2008). Similarly, according to the normalization theory, the environment of heavy drinkers would routinely expose them to the negative effects of drinking, making them less likely than lighter drinkers to feel the negative impact of others’ drinking (e.g., McGee, Ketchel, & Reeder, 2007; Sellman, Connor, & Joyce, 2010). It is therefore difficult to predict whether one’s own use of a substance is related to more or less worries about others’ use of the same substance.

Demographic variables are also associated with the tendency to worry. For instance, women generally report more worry than men (Robichaud, Dugas, & Conway, 2003). However, to our knowledge no previous study has addressed this issue in relation to others’ substance use. How age in general contribute to worries is less clear-cut. A study applying a general worry scale among adults and college students found that adults were more worried than young individuals about health, family concerns and world issues. Younger individuals, on the other hand, had a more general, trait-like tendency to worry (Hunt, Wisocki, & Yanko, 2003). Thus, it is not obvious which age group will worry most about others’ substance use. Having a partner may serve as a protective factor considering the fact that those who do not live with a partner both drink alcohol and visit on-premise outlets more frequently than those who live with a partner (Bye et al., 2013). Thus, they are more often exposed to situations that may cause worries about others’ substance use. The association between parenting status and worry about others’ substance use has not yet been studied in surveys (see Manton, MacLean, Laslett, & Room, 2014, for a qualitative study). However, it seems plausible that parents are more likely to worry since others’ substance use can potentially have a negative impact on their offspring as well as themselves. Moreover, they may worry about their children’s substance use per se.

The associations examined in this study are complex. For example, if there are gender differences in worries about others’ drinking, this may be caused by gender differences in the respondents’ own drinking pattern. We will therefore examine which of the associations remain statistically significant after controlling for all other predictors using regression analyses.

Aims of the study

The aims of this study were: (1) to describe the prevalence of worries about others’ alcohol, cigarette and illegal drug use, (2) whose use people worry about, (3) the overlap in worries, and (4) To examine how worries about others’ use of each substance vary according to demographics, own substance use and experience of harm from others’ use.

Methods

Procedure and respondents

Data were obtained from a national survey on alcohol, tobacco and illegal drug use conducted in Norway in 2012. The survey was commissioned by the Norwegian Institute of Alcohol and Drug Research (SIRUS) and carried out by Statistics Norway.

A sample of 3000 individuals aged 16–79 years, and an additional sample of 700 16–30 years old, were drawn from The

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