



Original article

Substance use capital: Social resources enhancing youth substance use

Capital drogue : ressources sociales augmentant l'utilisation de drogues chez les jeunes

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Abstract

Background. – Social capital is described as a protective factor against youth substance use, but it may also be associated with behaviours that do not enhance health. The present study hypothesized that ‘substance use capital’, i.e. resources favourable to substance use, is a risk factor for substance use and misuse.

Methods. – We used baseline data from the ongoing Cohort Study on Substance Use Risk Factors (C-SURF) that included a representative sample of young Swiss men ($n = 5623$). Substance use (alcohol, cannabis, 15 illicit drugs, lifetime use, hazardous use and dependence), substance use capital (parental and peer attitudes towards substance use, parental and peer drug use, perceived norms of substance use) and aspects of social capital (relationships with parents and peers) were assessed. Logistic regressions were used to examine the associations between substance-related resources and social resources, and substance use.

Results. – Results showed that substance-related resources were associated with an increased risk of substance use (OR between 1.25 and 4.67), whereas social resources’ associations with substance use were commonly protective but weaker than substance-related resources. Thus, a drug-friendly environment facilitated substance use and misuse. Moreover, the results showed that peer environments were more drug-friendly than familial environments.

Conclusion. – In conclusion, this study highlighted a concept of ‘substance use capital’, which may be useful for advancing both theoretical and applied knowledge of substance use. Indeed, substance use is not only associated with a lack of social resources, but also with specific drug-friendly social resources coming from environment and background.

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Keywords: Drugs; Family; Health behaviour; Protective factors; Risk factors; Social capital

Résumé

Position du problème. – Le capital social est décrit comme étant un facteur de protection pour la consommation de substances chez les jeunes. Cependant, il peut aussi être associé à des comportements néfastes pour la santé. La présente étude fait l’hypothèse que des ressources sociales favorables à l’utilisation de substances (c’est-à-dire un « capital drogue ») est un risque pour l’utilisation et l’abus de substances.

Méthode. – Les données de la première vague d’enquête de l’étude de cohorte C-SURF (Cohort Study on Substance Use Risk Factors) auprès d’un échantillon représentatif de 5623 jeunes hommes suisses ont été utilisées. La consommation de substances (alcool, cannabis, 15 autres drogues illicites, initiation, consommation hasardeuse, dépendance), le capital drogue (attitude des parents et des pairs à l’égard de la drogue,

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consommation de drogues de la famille et des pairs, perception des normes de consommation de substances) et des aspects du capital social (relations avec les parents et les pairs) ont été mesurés. Des régressions logistiques ont été utilisées afin de tester les liens du capital social et du capital drogue avec la consommation de substances.

Résultats. – Les résultats montrent que les ressources liées au capital drogue sont associées à un risque accru de consommation de substances (OR entre 1,25 et 4,67), tandis que les ressources liées au capital social sont protectrices contre la consommation de substances tout en étant plus faibles. Ainsi, un environnement favorable à la consommation de drogues facilite la consommation et l'abus de substances. Par ailleurs, les résultats montrent que l'environnement amical est plus favorable à la consommation de drogues que l'environnement familial.

Conclusion. – En conclusion, cette étude propose l'existence d'un concept de « capital drogue », qui peut être utile aussi bien du point de vue théorique qu'appliqué dans le champ de la consommation de substances. En effet, la consommation de drogues n'est pas seulement associée à un manque de ressources sociales (de capital social), mais aussi à un environnement spécifique favorable à la consommation de substances.

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Mots clés : Drogues ; Famille ; Comportement en matière de santé ; Facteurs protecteurs ; Facteurs de risques ; Capital social

1. Background

Substance use among youth is a serious public health problem, and its origins and risk factors must be clearly understood in order to reduce that use [1]. Substance use has been thoroughly studied and several risk and protective factors have been highlighted. Generally speaking, it involves interacting environmental, social, and individual factors [2–5]. A useful framework often used to understand the social reasons for youth substance use is the concept of social capital. However, the studies referring to social capital often focused on its positive consequences, and the fact that social capital may also have harmful effects is underinvestigated [6]. To fill in this gap, this study examined both sides of social capital and showed how different social factors are likely to enhance youth substance use by creating a “substance use capital.”

1.1. The social capital framework

Social capital has been studied through two different schools: American and European [7]. For the European school, Bourdieu [8] extended the idea of economic capital to other areas, such as social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital. All these forms of capital are resources available to the individual and facilitate social mobility. For the American school, social capital is synonymous with social connections that facilitate action and have a collective value [9]. Social capital includes structural components, i.e., networks and connectedness, shared norms and values, as well as associational life [10]; and cognitive components, i.e., sociability, such as trust, social support, and social cohesion [11]. Social capital is also divided into two types: bonding and bridging social capital [9]. Bonding social capital results from homogeneous social networks, i.e., groups of similar people, such as families or gangs, and therefore enhances trust and reciprocity. Bridging social capital results from heterogeneous social networks, i.e., connections across heterogeneous groups of people, such as hobby clubs or organizations. Socialization with people from different backgrounds increases cooperation and reduces stereotypes.

Most of the time, studies have referred to the American school and described the positive effects of social capital [6]. As Putnam said, “social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy” [9] (p. 290). These positive outcomes were emphasized especially among youth, e.g., improved health and less delinquency [9,12]. However, some studies also highlighted the negative consequences of social capital, i.e., “the dark side of social capital.” Social capital may indeed lead to social intolerance, cleavages, problematic group behavior, and deviant behavior in youth [6,9,12–14]. The “dark side of social capital” appeared mostly related to bonding ties [9], because bonding social capital may reinforce social cleavages between groups. The European school can provide a better understanding of these negative effects of social capital. The conceptualization of social capital as a resource is more neutral: it can include both positive and negative aspects, according to the relationships people build and the environment where they grew up and lived.

1.2. Social capital and youth substance use

At the individual level, the positive effects of social capital are usually expected for substance use (i.e., to reduce substance use), as is the case for other outcomes. Therefore, social capital may be protective against substance use. Several studies showed an association of social capital with healthy behaviors [15–18]. Previous studies often associated increases in drug use with a lack or loss of social capital, e.g., moving to another home [19], not being raised in a two-parent family [20,21], being raised in a disrupted family with a lack of parental attachment [4,22–24], a lack of bonds with peers [16], or a lack of civic engagement [18]. However, substance use is not necessarily associated with low or lack of social capital. Supportive communities of drug users (i.e., bonding social networks), such as acquaintances with deviant peers [15,25–28] or growing up in a drug-friendly environment, may enhance youth substance use [16]. These factors are also social resources that can contribute to behaviors that do not enhance health and positive outcomes.

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