



Illicit substance use among university students from seven European countries: A comparison of personal and perceived peer use and attitudes towards illicit substance use



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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 1 August 2014

Keywords:

Illicit drugs

Students

Europe

Health behaviour

ABSTRACT

Objective: To compare European students' personal use and approval of illicit substance use with their perceptions of peer behaviours and attitudes, and investigate whether perceptions of peer norms are associated with personal use of illicit substances and attitudes.

Method: This study used baseline data from the Social Norms Intervention for the prevention of Polydrug use (SNIPE) project involving 4482 students from seven European countries in 2012. Students completed an online survey which included questions on personal and perceived peer illicit substance use and personal and perceived peer attitude towards illicit substances.

Results: 8.3% of students reported having used illicit substances at least once in their life. 49.7% of students perceived that the majority of their peers have used illicit substances more frequently than themselves. The perception was significantly associated with higher odds for personal illicit substance use (OR: 1.97, 95% CI: 1.53–2.54). The perception that the majority of peers approve illicit substance use was significantly associated with higher odds for personal approval of illicit substance use (OR: 3.47, 95% CI: 2.73–4.41).

Conclusion: Students commonly perceived that their peers used illicit substances more often than themselves. We found an association between the perceived peer norms/attitudes and reported individual behaviour/attitudes.

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Introduction

Illicit substance use is particularly prevalent among young adults in Europe. Cannabis remains the most frequently consumed illicit substance but substances such as cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamines are also widely used by young adults (EMCDDA, 2010). While cannabis

use among young adults has decreased in the last decade, the use of other illicit substances such as amphetamines has remained stable (EMCDDA, 2006; EMCDDA, 2010). There is virtually no cross-national data on illicit substance use of students but comparable studies indicate that adolescents in England and Spain use illicit substances more frequently compared to young people in other European countries (EMCDDA, 2006; EMCDDA, 2013).

Research originating in the USA has identified that peers are the most salient social referents for young population groups, such as university students, and that incorrect perceptions of peers' substance use may exert considerable influence on personal substance use

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behaviours (Perkins and Wechsler, 1996; Perkins, 2002). In this context, peer norms can be differentiated into two types: descriptive and injunctive norms. The former refers to perceptions of the quantity and frequency of peer substance use and the latter to perceptions of peer approval of substance use. Most of the evidence on inaccurate perceptions regarding health behaviour in student populations is related to alcohol; numerous studies have shown that students tend to overestimate the alcohol use of their peers (Berkowitz, 2004; Page et al., 2008; Perkins, Haines and Rice, 2005; Perkins and Wechsler, 1996) and that perceived norms of peer alcohol use predict how often and how heavily an individual drinks alcohol (Lintonen and Konu, 2004; Perkins, 2007; Perkins and Wechsler, 1996). In addition, there is evidence that students overestimate their peers' use of marijuana (Kilmer et al., 2006; Perkins et al., 1999; Wolfson, 2000), and that peer norms are determinants of marijuana use among students and adolescents (Ali, Amialchuk and Dwyer, 2011; Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al., 2010; Kilmer et al., 2006). Research examining misperceptions of use of other illicit substances is sparse. In a study by Perkins et al. (1999), the majority of participants thought that the average student used cocaine, amphetamines or hallucinogens, yet abstinence was the median response for all illicit substances (Perkins et al., 1999). These findings were confirmed in a subsequent study by Martens et al. (2006).

Research on alcohol consumption has also shown that students tend to misperceive the injunctive norms (Borsari and Carey, 2003; McAlaney, Bewick and Hughes, 2011). There is meta-analytic evidence of a large discrepancy between students' own alcohol use, the attitudes and the perceived approval from other students, with students perceiving their peers to be more accepting of alcohol use than they actually are (Borsari and Carey, 2003). To date, injunctive norms relating to illicit substances have only been examined for marijuana use, with studies indicating that a perceived approval of substance use among close peers is positively associated with personal substance use (Neighbors, Geisner and Lee, 2008a; Neighbors et al., 2008b; Buckner, 2013). These research findings have given rise to a new form of intervention for reducing substance use known as the "social norms approach", which challenges misperceptions of peer descriptive and injunctive norms via social marketing or personalised web-based feedback to reduce misperceptions and the perceived social pressure on the individual to use these substances (McAlaney, Bewick and Hughes, 2011).

The vast majority of research into normative misperceptions originates in the USA. A limited number of European studies have evaluated misperceptions of illicit substance use but none have investigated injunctive norms (Ali, Amialchuk and Dwyer, 2011; McAlaney, Bewick and Hughes, 2011). In the present study, we assessed personal use as well as the approval of illicit substance use, and evaluated perceptions of peers' use and peers' approval of illicit substances among students from seven European countries. The following hypotheses guided the research: (a) European university students perceive that the use and approval of illicit substances by the majority of their peers are higher than the estimates based on actual reported own consumption, and (b) students showing high perceptions of the consumption or approval of illicit substance use of their peers will be more likely to use illicit substances or approve illicit substance use on their own.

Methods

Data

The analysis is based on data from the Social Norms Intervention for the prevention of Polydrug use (SNIPE) project funded by the European Commission (LS/2009–2010/DPIP/AG). An overview of the SNIPE trial is provided elsewhere (Pischke et al., 2012). SNIPE involved the collection of baseline survey data from students to develop a web-based personalised social norms feedback intervention for substance use for students from universities in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Turkey and the

United Kingdom. The number of participating universities varied across countries with two universities in Belgium, Denmark, Spain and the UK, three in Germany, four in the Slovak Republic and six campuses of one university in Turkey. Participants were recruited by various means, including emails, class announcements, adverts on virtual learning environments and printed flyers. Students first registered on the SNIPE website and were simultaneously informed that their information was pseudonymised during the survey and anonymised for statistical analysis. Subsequently, a hyperlink to the survey webpage was emailed.

The survey included questions on the student's personal use of licit (alcohol, tobacco) and illicit substances (see 'measurements'), their attitudes towards the use of these substances and their perceptions of their peers' substance use behaviours and attitudes. Demographic data, including participant's age, gender, migrant status, year of study and living situation (with other students or not) were also collected. Study participation was voluntary. Ethical approval was obtained from the respective ethical review board for each site involved in the SNIPE project.

Measurements

To measure personal illicit substance use, students were asked how often they used a variety of illicit substances, including: cocaine, ecstasy, other amphetamine-type stimulants, hallucinogens, synthetic cannabinoids, and inhalants, followed by a list of examples and street names for each substance. In our study we also examined the use of cannabis but did not include cannabis in these analyses as the prevalence is considerably higher than that of other illicit substances (EMCDDA, 2013). The choice of illicit substances was based on the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST), developed by the World Health Organization (Humeniuk et al., 2010). Response options ranged from 'never in my life', 'have used but not in the last two months' to 'every day or nearly every day'. If students indicated usage of at least one of the stated substances at some time in their life they were coded as lifetime illicit substance users. Participants who reported having used at least one of the illicit substances in the previous two months at least once were categorised as current illicit substance users.

Perceptions of peer illicit substance use were assessed using sex-specific items based on the corresponding personal use categories. The respondents were asked "How often in the last two months do you think most (at least 51%) of the [female/male (the question was tailored to the same sex as respondent)] students at your university have used the following?". Moreover, we collected data on personal and perceived peer attitudes towards illicit substances using the questions "Which of the following best describes your attitude to using each of these substances?" and "Which of the following do you think best describes the attitude of most (at least 51%) of the female/male students at your university to the use of each of these substances?". Response options were 'Never ok to use', 'Ok to use occasionally if it doesn't interfere with study or work', 'Ok to use frequently if it doesn't interfere with study or work', 'Ok to use occasionally even if it does interfere with study or work', and 'Ok to use frequently if that is what the person wants to do'.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive analysis was performed using tabulations for personal substance use and attitudes towards illicit substances by sex and by country. We calculated 95% bootstrap confidence intervals based on 1000 bootstrap samples for each country. Furthermore, we calculated the percentages of respondents who perceived the illicit substance use of the majority of same-sex students as higher/as identical/as lower as the report of the corresponding own behaviour estimate. Binary logistic regression analyses were subsequently conducted to examine associations between perceived and personal behaviours and attitudes. Sex, age, year of study, living situation and perceived substance use/attitude towards substance use were included as independent variables in the models. Personal illicit substance use was added as an Independent variable to the injunctive norms model. For these analyses age was used as a continuous variable and all others as categorical variables. To investigate whether sex or country moderates the association between perception and personal behaviour/attitude, we added the two relevant interaction terms to the regression models. For the main descriptive norms model we used lifetime illicit substance use as the dependent variable and also repeated the same analysis with the dependent variable current illicit substance use. Additionally, we conducted stratified analyses by variables for those

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