



Short communication

## Childhood characteristics associated with stage of substance use of American Indians: Family background, traumatic experiences, and childhood behaviors<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

The purpose of this analysis is to examine childhood characteristics associated with stage of substance use in adulthood in two American Indian (AI) populations. Data were drawn from an epidemiologic study of two AI reservation populations for persons age 18–44 years ( $n=2070$ ). We used descriptive and multivariate analysis to examine correlates of four mutually exclusive stages of substance use: lifetime abstinence (Stage 0), use of alcohol only (Stage 1A), use of marijuana/inhalants with or without alcohol (Stage 1B), and use of other illicit drugs with or without the previously listed substances (Stage 2). Problematic substance use by parents, younger age of first substance use, initiating substance use with a drug (with or without alcohol), and adolescent conduct problems were associated with higher stage substance use. Persons who experienced sexual abuse, witnessed family violence, or experienced other traumatic events before the age of 18 were more likely to be at Stage 1B than Stage

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1A. These findings underscore the importance of providing effective interventions during childhood and adolescence to reduce the risk of substance use progression.

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## 1. Introduction

The burden of problematic substance use in American Indian (AI) communities is substantial. Studies document that AIs generally are more likely than their non-AI counterparts to develop alcohol use disorders (Beals et al., 2005), to suffer from a variety alcohol-related physical health conditions (Indian Health Service, 2003), and to die from alcohol-related causes (Indian Health Service, 2003). Correlates of substance use problems emerging from community, school, and clinically-based studies include male gender (Novins & Barün, 2004), antisocial behaviors (Beauvais, 1996), peer substance use (Beauvais, 1992), and familial substance use as well as child traumatic experience (Libby et al., 2004).

“Stage” or “Gateway Theory” provides a valuable framework for examining the correlates of substance use in a developmental framework. Originally developed by Kandel and colleagues (Kandel, 1975), this theory states that substance users’ first use of substances follows this specific sequence: “legal” substances (e.g., alcohol); marijuana; other illicit drugs; cocaine; and crack. In this study, we examined childhood characteristics associated with stage of substance use for a large, community-based sample of AI adults using a version of Stage Theory modified to fit substance use patterns identified in a previous school-based study of AI adolescents (Novins & Barün, 2004; Novins, Beals, & Mitchell, 2001).

## 2. Methods

Data were drawn from the American Indian Service Utilization, Psychiatric Epidemiology, Risk and Protective Factors Project (AI-SUPERPPF, Beals, Manson, Mitchell, Spicer, & The AI-SUPERPPF Team, 2003), the first large-scale, population-based psychiatric epidemiologic study of AIs. The population of inference was enrolled members of two closely related Northern Plains tribes (NP) and a Southwestern tribe (SW) who lived on or within 20 miles of their reservations. In these analyses, we focused on those participants ages 18–44 years who had complete information regarding alcohol and drug use (the latter criteria resulted in the exclusion of 95 participants), resulting in a final sample size of 2070.

All measures were derived from the AI-SUPERPPF lay interview (Beals et al., 2003). Using reports of lifetime consumption of a substance six times or more during any one year for non-medical purposes, respondent *stage of substance use* was operationalized using four mutually exclusive, hierarchical stages: Stage 0, lifetime abstinence; Stage 1A, alcohol use only; Stage 1B, marijuana and/or inhalant use with or without alcohol use; and Stage 2, other illicit drug use with or without the use of the previously listed substances. This stage classification was based on previous work by Novins et al. (2001) and Novins and Barün (2004) concerning the sequence of substance use among AI adolescents and is a modification of Kandel’s (1975) sequence.

Potential correlates of stage of substance use included measures of family background, traumatic events, and antisocial and substance use behaviors (see Table 2 for full listing of these measures). For this study, traumatic experiences prior to age 18 included: *sexual abuse, other violent trauma, witnessing*

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