



Illicit drug use and marital satisfaction

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Abstract

With the acquisition of adult social roles such as marriage, more deviant or socially disapproved behaviors such as drug use often decrease. The objective of this work was to examine patterns of illicit drug use in a community sample of adults during the transition and early years of marriage. Additionally, this work examined if couples who were discrepant in their drug use (i.e., one individual reported past year drug use and the partner reported no use) experience sharper declines in marital satisfaction compared to other couples. Multilevel regression models explored these issues over the first four years of marriage ($N=634$ couples). Although rates of illicit drug use decline over the first four years of marriage, a significant number of husbands and wives continued to use illicit drugs (21% and 16%, respectively). At the transition to marriage, both husbands and wives who had discrepant drug use behaviors experienced lower levels of marital satisfaction compared to other couples. Over the first four years of marriage, couples in each group experienced significant declines in marital satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

The process of psychosocial maturation suggests that as individuals progress through early adulthood, more deviant behaviors such as illicit drug use should cease (Labouvie, 1996). Labouvie (1996) suggests that during this process individuals attempt to self-regulate their behaviors and thus correct behaviors that are not normative or socially acceptable. Further, Role Incompatibility Theory (Thornton & Nardi, 1975) postulates that behaviors that are not congruent with a social role are more likely to be discontinued. For example, Miller-Tutzauer, Leonard, and Windle (1991) used data from a nationally representative sample of US adults and found that the first year of marriage was associated with a decline in the amount of heavy drinking. Additionally, they found that the decline in heavy drinking was actually evident in the year prior to marriage, suggesting that as these individuals were anticipating the transition into a new social role, heavy drinking declined. Similarly, Bachman, Wadsworth, O'Malley, Johnston, and Schulenberg (1997) found that marriage (and even the anticipation of marriage) was related to a reduction or cessation of both licit substances (i.e., alcohol use, tobacco use) as well as illicit substance use (i.e., marijuana and cocaine). Additionally, the relation between the transition to marriage and reductions in substance use held for both men and women.

Yamaguchi and Kandel (1985) investigated the relation between social roles (e.g., first marriage, becoming a parent) and the cessation of marijuana use. Among men, the year prior to marriage as well as the year in which they became a parent were associated with cessation of marijuana use. Among women, the year prior to marriage, as well as the time of marriage and in the year prior to having a baby were all significantly associated with a cessation of marijuana use. Others have also found that the transition into family roles was related to reductions in illicit drug use (Chen & Kandel, 1998). Taken together, strong evidence exists to suggest that the acquisition of adult roles such as marriage is associated with a reduction in illicit drug use.

Although the transition into adult roles such as marriage (or the anticipation of a transition into adult roles) is often associated with a reduction in illicit drug use, not all individuals cease their drug involvement. For example, in a community sample of newly married couples, almost one-fifth of wives (19.7%) and about a quarter of husbands (25.5%) reported past year marijuana use (Leonard & Homish, 2005). Although the drug use declined through the second wedding anniversary, a significant number of wives (12.5%) and husbands (18.7%) continued to use marijuana. Using data from the US National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health, 6.8% of married women and 8.9% of married men reported any past year illicit drug (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2003). When restricting this sample to married adults under the age of 30, 13.1% of women reported any past year illicit drug use and 19.3% of men reported any past year illicit drug use. In another large US survey (Monitoring the Future), 5.1% of 35 year old married women reported marijuana use in the past 30 days and 9.5% of 35 year old married men reported marijuana use in the past 30 days (Merline, O'Malley, Schulenberg, Bachman, & Johnston, 2004). Although rates of illicit drug use generally decrease with increasing age and the assumption of adult roles, it is clear that illicit drug use does not end for everyone.

In accord with role incompatibility theory, socially deviant behaviors such as illicit drug use are not compatible with traditional adult, social roles such as marriage or parenthood (Vargas-Carmona, Newcomb, & Galaif, 2002); therefore, these individuals may be more likely to experience difficulty within a variety of aspects of their lives. One such domain that may be impacted by the continuation of illicit drug use is within the marital relationship. This may be especially true if only one member of the couple is involved with illicit drug use. In a cross-sectional study of substance use behaviors among newly

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