

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jado](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jado)

## Relation of peer effects and school climate to substance use among Asian American adolescents



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 18 May 2015

## Keywords:

Asian Americans  
Heavy episodic drinking  
Illicit drug use  
Immigrant generation  
School climate

## ABSTRACT

Using a nationally representative, longitudinal sample of Asian American late adolescents/young adults (ages 18–26), this article investigates the link between peer effects, school climate, on the one hand, and substance use, which includes tobacco, alcohol, and other illicit mood altering substance. The sample (N = 1585) is drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Waves I and III). The study is set to empirically test premises of generational, social capital and stage-environment fit theories. The exploratory variables include individual-level (immigrant generation status, ethnic origin, co-ethnic and co-generational peers – peers from the same immigrant generation) as well as school-level measures (average school socio-economic status and school climate). Multilevel modeling (logistic and negative binomial regression) was used to estimate substance use. Results indicate that preference for co-generational friends is inversely associated with frequency of cannabis and other illicit drug use and preference for co-ethnic peers is inversely associated with other illicit drug use. We also find that school climate is a strong and negative predictor of frequency of cannabis and other illicit drug use as well as of heavy episodic drinking. In terms of policy, these findings suggest that Asian American students should benefit from co-ethnic and co-generational peer networks in schools and, above all, from improving school climate.

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### Introduction

Substance use among adolescents is a serious public health problem in the United States. In the past month, 39 percent of high school seniors reported drinking some alcohol, almost 23 percent reported using cannabis, and 16 percent reported smoking cigarettes (Johnston, O'Malley, Miech, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2014). By the twelfth grade, about half of adolescents have used an illicit drug at least once (Johnston et al., 2014). Whilst there is burgeoning literature on prevalence and risk factors of adolescents' substance use, research on Asian American adolescents has been scarce compared with other race-ethnic groups (Hahm, Lahiff, & Guterman, 2003; Price, Risk, Wong, & Klinge, 2002). Moreover, the existing literature on alcohol, tobacco and illicit substance use among Asian Americans focused on family influences and ethnic resilience, while leaving the role of peer networks and school climate unexamined (Hahm et al., 2003; Price et al., 2002). This longitudinal

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study represents the first systematic investigation of both peer generational effects and school climate associated with substance use among Asian American adolescents/young adults.

This study is both conceptually and empirically significant. It updates and expands the implications of earlier research (Hahm et al., 2003; Hahm, Lahiff, & Guterman, 2004) by incorporating more recent theoretical developments, empirical findings, and statistical techniques. On a theoretical plane, the present study integrates sociological theory of generation (Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Eyerman & Turner, 1998; Turner, 1998) with social capital theory (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998) and stage-environment fit theory (Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Gutman & Eccles, 2007) to elucidate the impact of generational and ethnic social capital, school characteristics (average SES and school climate), family background, and immigrant generation status on Asian American substance use. On a methodological plane, this research introduces two peer network measures— co-generational peer saliency and co-ethnic peer saliency. These indicators monitor generational and ethnic forms of social capital present in immigrant networks. The other novelty of the present study is the introduction of a measure for school climate, a school-level variable that monitors quality of student–student and student–teacher relationships. On an empirical plane, this study capitalizes on the availability of a nationally-representative dataset – the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Waves I and III) – and multivariate regression modeling to estimate the prevalence of substance use among Asian American adolescents.

### **Immigrant generation and ethnic social capital**

Segmented assimilation theory, arguably the prevalent theoretical development in the field of immigrant assimilation today, explains immigrant adaptation as a function of individual as well as contextual factors (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997). According to this theory, some immigrant groups are at greater risk of downward mobility than others (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2005; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Xie & Greenman, 2011). Because of their public image as a model minority, Asian Americans are often assumed to be at low risk of following the treacherous downward assimilation path (Perlmann & Waldinger, 1997; Zhou & Xiong, 2005). Nevertheless, contemporary empirical investigations tend to support the assertion that the assimilation of Asian immigrants and their children is accompanied by deterioration in behavioral outcomes over both time and generation in the U.S. (e.g., Mouw & Xie, 1999; Ryabov, 2011b; Unger et al., 2000; Wong & Maffini, 2011). Scholarship examining substance use among Asian youth has found that foreign-born Asian Americans have lower rates of alcohol use (Hahm et al., 2003, 2004) and narcotics use (Hussey et al. 2007; Thai, Connell, & Tebes, 2010) compared to second- and third-generation co-ethnics.

In elucidating the phenomenon of “second generations decline” (Zhou & Xiong, 2005), it is important to note that prior research offers three explanatory models – protective culture, inter-generational conflict and resiliency. According to the resiliency model (e.g., Portes & Bach, 1985; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), immigrant youth enter the U.S. with a resiliency (i.e., internal strength) that protects them against involvement in health risk behaviors such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, and generates coping with and adaptation to stressful life circumstances. The resiliency encourages healthy adjustment, adaptation, and social competence in the face of adversity but it decreases with time spent in the U.S. The intergenerational conflict model suggests that the differential pace of adaptation to the receiving context creates intergeneration conflict between parents and children, leading to behavioral problems among immigrant youth (e.g., Glick, 2010; Phinney, Berry, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). The focus variables that are useful in explaining the intergenerational conflict model relate to the quality of parent–child interactions. Hence, entering these variables into the subsequent analyses is essential for testing the model. According to the protective culture model, certain aspects of Asian American culture decrease risk for substance use but protective cultural attributes dissipate with each successive generation (Hahm et al., 2004; Iwamoto, Takamatsu, & Castellanos, 2012; Unger et al., 2000). One of the ways to capture the protective culture construct is to measure social capital present in immigrant co-ethnic networks (Mouw & Xie, 1999; Pong, Hao, & Gardner, 2005; Ryabov, 2009, 2011b).

Generally, social capital theory suggests that social capital, the network of relationships possessed by an individual and the set of resources embedded within it, strongly influence the extent to which knowledge and value sharing occurs (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Mounting evidence suggests that immigrants often have an abundance of social capital in the form of co-ethnic ties, which they draw on to explore educational opportunities, find employment, housing, etc. (Mouw, 2003; Portes, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Some scholars (e.g., Mouw, 2003; Ryabov, 2009) refer to the notion of ethnic social capital as a resource available to members of minority groups through their co-ethnic networks. With regard to ethnic ties among immigrant youth, studies stemming from social capital theory (Mouw, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) suggest that school friendships networks offer an opportunity structure indispensable for the academic and professional advancement of minority students, including Asian Americans.

### **Generational social capital**

Although researchers have increasingly explored the role of co-ethnic ties in maintaining the health and wellbeing of immigrant youth (e.g., Gonzales, 2010; Hussey et al. 2007; Pong et al., 2005), little attention has been paid to another form of social ties that all immigrants share – bonds based on their immigrant generation. Against this backdrop, we use generational theory to explain variations in the substance use among Asian American adolescents/young adults. Karl Mannheim (1952), the founder of generational theory, defined a generation as being similar to the class position of an individual in society to which he also referred to as “social location.” Contemporary generational theory pioneered by Turner and colleagues

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