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The Indirect Effects of Family Structure on Drug Use in Adolescents

This paper focuses on explaining the significant relationship between family structure and adolescent drug abuse. Significant differences in drug abuse frequency and patterns among adolescents living in two-parent, step-parent, and single-parent households does not show to be directly related to family structure, but rather attributable to the variation of social controls and family processes that occur among the diverse types of households. My thesis is that adolescents living in two-biological-parent households will be less likely to participate in drug abuse than adolescents living in one-parent or step-parent households because there is more supervision and monitoring as well as a better likelihood of closer bonds between the child and parent in two-parent families. The two mediating factors proven to best explain the link between family structure and drug abuse in adolescents are direct and indirect parental control (Demuth and Brown 2004), although indirect parental control seems to be more of a predictor (Choquet et al. 2008). In this paper, the following background section will give some explanations of various family types, a few definitions, and the topic's sociological relevance.

Background

Dramatic shifts in child living arrangements over the past few decades have given society many new, diverse, and complex family structures. Adolescents now reside in not only two-biological-parent households and single-parent households, but also in step family households and nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation households. The growth of these different family

types can be attributed to the high divorce rate because divorce not only splits families apart but allows for new relationships to form between the divorced parents and different people. In modern American society, statistics show that more than one half of children will live in a single-parent family for at least several months before turning 18-years-old (Flewelling and Bauman 1990).

Researchers have studied the effects of varying family structures on many sociological topics which all try to gain a better understanding of how and to what degree the organization of family influences perceptions or behaviors in individuals. The association between family structure and delinquency among adolescents has been a popular area of interest to many sociologists and much research has been done on the topic. This paper looks to explain the association of a more specific type of delinquency, being drug abuse.

Family structure and its subsequent effects on drug abuse in adolescents is thus, a sociologically relevant topic. This is because family is a very important social learning tool and is responsible, in large, for the creation of every individual's behaviors, opinions, and personality. Children learn different norms and observe different social problems growing up in different family structures and thus, family structure is seen to have many correlations/associations with many different social phenomena. For example, family structure can possibly affect the quality of relationships with others one has in the future and/or the likelihood of having depressive symptoms. In this case, family structure is significantly associated with drug abuse in adolescents.

I define drug abuse in this paper as any misuse of legal or illegal substances that are used by the adolescent to alter their feelings, behaviors, or perceptions. I do not differentiate between one-time, moderate, or excessive drug abuse but I only take into consideration marijuana and

other prescription drugs. In most of the research used to defend this paper, researchers do control for the frequency of intake in the adolescent individuals (Miller 1997; Broman, Li and Reckase 2008; Hoffman and Johnson 1998).

In almost all studies done on the subject, the risk of drug abuse among adolescents is found to be lowest in mother-father biological families (Hoffman and Johnson 1998; McArdle et al. 2002; Miller 1997; Demuth and Brown 2004; Flewelling and Bauman 1990). In the other family structures, there seems to be little difference in drug abuse frequency by adolescents between the various incomplete families except within the single-parent structure (Miller 1997). Gender differences account for a higher likelihood of drug use by adolescents living in father-only versus mother-only situations (Hoffman and Johnson 1998). Gender differences stand also as a predicting role in the general nature of drug abuse by adolescents because research shows that there are indeed differences in alcohol and marijuana consumption between boys and girls (Choquet et al. 2008).

Although a significant relationship exists between family structure and drug abuse in adolescents, family structure has been found to have little impact on the usage once potential mediators are accounted for (Broman et al. 2008). Miller (1997) states, “association between family structure and misuse of drugs is consistent with family break-up leading to particular personalities and life-styles which in turn are conducive to substance use” (121). Therefore, it is not the physical absence of one or both biological parents that directly explains the lower likelihood of drug use by adolescents in mother-father households, but rather the stronger level of control and bonds between parents and their children that exist in this structure. Demuth and Brown (2004) explain, “the *actual attitudes and relationships affecting [social] control* are considered the crucial factors [in explaining drug abuse in association with family structure], but

these are found more concentrated in families with certain structures than others” (61).

Therefore, social controls, such as direct parental controls and indirect parental controls, are different in two-biological-parent households than in single or step-parent households. Sokol-Katz and Dunham (1997) explain that weaker social controls exist in single-parent or step-parent families because of “social disorganization”, or lack of a parent, which can inhibit the normalization of internal and external controls. Also, they believe children raised in single-headed households may be lacking the necessary support and monitoring inherent in a two-parent family because the entire burden is borne by only one adult.

Direct parental controls and indirect parental controls actually refer to the parent’s levels of supervision, monitoring and punishment in the household as well as the quality of the bond between the parent and child. Research has shown that direct parental controls is a lesser indicator of delinquency than indirect parental controls because children who have strong social bonds with their parents stress about interrupting that close connection more than they fear possibly being caught for their actions because of close monitoring and supervision (Demuth and Brown 2004).

In this paper, I will first fully explain direct parental social controls and indirect parental social controls and their link as mediating variables in the relationship between family structure and drug abuse. I will then only touch upon a few other mediating variables. Lastly, I will provide a conclusion of all my information and results and eventually end with a discussion of the limitations of the research and a few directions for future research.

Direct Parental Social Controls

Differences in drug use patterns by teenagers living in two-parent, step-parent and single-parent households cannot be directly linked to family-structure without accounting for the factors that mediate this association. Direct parental social controls, such as supervision, monitoring, and involvement, diminish the likelihood of juvenile delinquency because of the fear of being negatively sanctioned for the crime.

Social control theory's basic premise is that humans engage in deviant behavior because norm violation is attractive and exciting and it is through internal and external social controls that one learns to either follow or disobey these norms. In explaining the relationship between parental social controls and drug abuse, it maintains that parents influence their child's delinquency through direct controls of behavior through restriction, supervision, and punishments (Demuth and Brown 2004). Direct controls are effective in controlling a lot of behavior in adolescents because many of them do not want to risk getting in trouble with individuals who can control their freedoms. In households with strong, direct controls by parents, it can be assumed that drug abuse by the children would be less likely because delinquent behavior would be harder to get away with.

Adolescents living in single-parent households are going to be more likely than adolescents living in two-parent households to use drugs because the absence of a parent allows for weaker, or fewer, parental direct controls (Demuth and Brown 2004). Single-parent families do not have the luxury of splitting responsibilities with another parent which decreases the single-parent's ability to effectively be instituting direct controls on their children. Step-family households are also more likely to have adolescents participate in drug abuse and this is because the step-parent may not feel comfortable enforcing punishment on a child that is not biologically

theirs and may not want to overstep their boundaries. These are both distinct correlates as to why drug patterns exist differentially across family-structures of many kinds.

Marie Choquet et al. (2008) argues that, there are links between a child's perceived parental control and perceived parental emotional support and their current alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis trends. Choquet explained, "parental control and parental emotional support are only liable to provide the expected effects if they are actually perceived by adolescents." Basically, if children do not recognize that parents are closely supervising their behavior, then they will be less likely to caution themselves in practicing delinquent behavior. It is only when children perceive they are being watched, that they'll be more likely to alter their deviant behavior. Results of the study showed a negative correlation between perceived parental control and drug use in adolescents. This means that the greater the perceived parental control, the lower the adolescent's substance use.

Gender differences have been shown to interact with parental direct social control in that girls are more systematic than boys in their perceived parental control (Choquet et al. 2008). This could possibly be due to girls, generally, being more family-oriented and boys more peer-oriented leading to boys possibly overlooking instances when they are actually being supervised or monitored. Paul McArdle et al. (2002), in his study on the associations between family structure and drug use in adolescents, theorizes that the gender differences are, "perhaps reflecting the relative psychosocial immaturity of adolescent boys, and their greater potential for under-controlled behavior in general"(335).

In all, direct parental social controls tend to influence the rate of substance abuse differently across various family types and across genders. In single-parent and step-parent households, there seems to be less and/or fewer direct controls because of the absence of one

parent. Although, even though these controls do affect deviant behavior in adolescents, indirect parental controls are actually a much greater indicator of drug abuse.

Indirect Parental Social Controls

A lot of research indicates that indirect parental controls, such as parental attachment, is an even better and more influential factor in explaining adolescent drug use in the context of different family structures. Past empirical research has presented evidence that a stronger relationship exists between indirect parental controls, like closeness to parents, and delinquency rather than some direct controls like monitoring or supervising (Demuth and Brown 2004).

Another finding in the research done by McArdle et al. (2002) reports that family attachment, the most influential indirect parental social control in relation to drug abuse among adolescents, are associated negatively with substance abuse. This makes sense in that adolescents who have stronger emotional attachments to their parents are less likely going to participate in drug abuse if it is going to disrupt this bond.

In Miller's (1997) study, he also goes on to find that there is decreased family attachment in households with single-parents and step-parents. The incomplete family structures of one-parent families and stepfamilies foster less opportunity for creating a strong attachment between child and parent, thus, reducing the parents' ability to condition the child to internalize conventional rules and normative behavior (Sokol-Katz and Dunham 1997). Broman et al. (2008) also found that single-parent families and stepfamilies are usually marked by different, or poorer, family interactions than two-parent families. Poorer interactions between individuals would not cause strong emotional attachments and thus this may be as to why adolescent drug use is less prominent in two-parent families.

In Travis Hirschi's social bonding theory, he explains that conformity is regulated through a bond between an individual and society that keeps them from disobeying the rules and this "attachment" is geared towards school, parents, and peers (Marcos, Bahr and Johnson 1989). This theory is a good sociological explanation for the link between the quality of a child's parental attachment level and their likelihood of drug abuse because it is more likely to have stronger parental bonds with children in two-parent families since there is more stability and usually less marital conflict.

Parental attachment, the most influential indirect parental social control and basis of the social bonding theory, is the best predictor of adolescent drug abuse because it really explains the reason as to why there is more adolescent drug abuse in single-parent and step-parent households. Researchers have shown that poorer family interactions and higher rates of conflict are evident in broken homes. Social bonding theory summarizes the relationship between the social control and deviant behavior.

A Few Other Mediating Variables

Although social controls are very high indicators of adolescent drug abuse and effectively mediate the relationship between family structure and drug abuse, this is not the only explanation.

Research has shown that levels of drug abuse in adolescents vary across many factors. For instance, earlier it was discussed that drug abuse trends are different for boys and girls. Choquet et al. (2008) found that alcohol and marijuana consumption is more prevalent among boys than girls and she found that it may be because of the different ways boys and girls perceive parental support and control.

Broman et al. (2008) found that religiosity and peer influence are two very important social indicators of drug abuse in adolescence. He explains that low levels of religiosity as well as associating with other peers that use drugs are both good predictors of drug abuse.

Lastly, Newcomb and Harlow (1986) show that in their study, stress and negative life events are big predictors of drug abuse in adolescents. These mediators could also be related to family structure because divorce, separation, and the death of a parent are all negative life events that also alter the family structure. The sociological theory of stress and coping could be another explanation for why drug abuse is higher in broken homes than in intact family environments.

In addition to these proven mediators, there are still other factors that may play roles in affecting drug abuse in adolescents like genetics, age, race/ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood location. Although I did not look into these factors, there have been studies done that could potentially link all of these variables to adolescent drug abuse.

Conclusion

There is a distinct and significant relationship between family structure and drug use among adolescents. It has been continuously proven that adolescents living in single-parent and step-parent families are much more likely than adolescents living in two-biological-parent families to participate in juvenile delinquency, such as drug use behavior. The family structure has an indirect effect on adolescent drug use. The actual physical absence of a parent does not contribute directly to increased likelihood of drug use among incomplete family structures, but these family types are actually more conducive to weaker, or fewer direct and indirect parental

social controls, which are the mediating factors that help associate the link between adolescent drug use and organization of family.

Much of my research showed that drug consumption patterns and the ability to perceive both direct and indirect parental controls were different for boys and girls. Drug use is more prevalent among boys and perceived parental control was more systematic among girls. There are still many other variables that affect drug abuse in adolescents. Religiosity, peer influence, and stress and negative life events have all shown to correlate directly with drug abuse. Variables such as socioeconomic status, education level, and race may all be potential indicators as well, but I did not delve too deeply into these topics.

The social control theory and social bonding theory stand as the bases of the correlation between family structure and adolescent drug use. They maintain that people commit crimes because deviant behavior is easier and/or exciting and it takes direct and indirect social controls to restrain people from committing crimes. I also touched upon the stress and coping theory, that could possibly also explain an increased drug abuse rate for adolescents in broken homes because there are more stressful social problems that arise when parents divorce or a parent dies and the coping method is drug use.

Research shows that two-parent households often exhibit many more direct parental controls on their children, like supervision, involvement, and closeness, which leads to less participation in deviant behavior by their children because they are more likely to get caught in crime and fear the consequences of their actions. Parental attachment, a very important and influential indirect parental social control associated negatively with substance use, also proves to be stronger in intact families because research has shown that there is usually decreased

family attachment in incomplete family structures due to poorer family interactions between family members.

Unfortunately, there are still some limitations to this research. Many samples and data sources do not take into account when, specifically, the change in family structure occurred in the deviant child's life. Although, in most cases, break-up of the family precedes drug use it is not clear whether the symptoms and lifestyle are actually consequences of the drug use (Miller 1997). Also, most studies I found only compared and contrasted between two or three different family types when, in reality, there are actually numerous family structures that could all have different degrees of affect on adolescent drug use. Lastly, the immensity of mediating variables makes it almost impossible to very surely conclude how important parental social controls are at predicting drug abuse.

In conclusion, since it has been shown that both direct and indirect parental social controls are important mediating variables in the relationship between family structure and adolescent drug abuse, society should be attempting to replicate the controls evident in a two-parent household to the best of its ability. Supervision, monitoring and involvement may need to be significantly enhanced in single-parent household if they care about their children using drugs. Some policy changes that may help conduct this could be mandatory family counseling after parental divorce or increased parent-child bonding activities at home that exhibit parental warmth, support and love. If increased parental attachment occurs in a broken home, there may be less drug abuse problems and crime.

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