Published in final edited form as:

Subst Use Misuse. 2014 June ; 49(8): 919–921. doi:10.3109/10826084.2014.887384.

Special Issue on Culture and Substance Use

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When we solicited manuscripts for this special issue on culture, we cast the net broadly. We asked for papers about the effects of culture on substance use, the effects of substance use on culture, and any other examples of ways in which substance use and culture can coevolve. We purposely left the definition of “culture” vague—both because scholars, and a broad range of individual and systemic substance use intervention stakeholders—policy makers, have been unable to agree on a definition of culture for hundreds of years and because we wanted the authors to interpret culture in their own unique ways without being constrained by a definition.

Although the papers submitted and eventually selected for publication in this special issue do not cover the full range of possible discourse on culture and substance use, they do represent a wide array of examples of intersections between culture and substance use. They include numerous well-known and more obscure substances ranging from alcohol to club drugs. They include a variety of cultural groups, including *cultural groups defined by national origin* (e.g., Hispanic adolescents [Grigsby et al., this issue], Hispanic college students [Zamboanga et al., this issue], Cambodian, Korean, and other Asian adults [Lo et al., this issue; Huh et al., this issue; Pagano et al., this issue; Park et al., this issue]); *cultural groups defined by common behaviors or life circumstances* (e.g., trans-gender individuals [Hoffman, this issue], participants in online drug discussion boards [Barratt et al., this issue; Brown et al., this issue], individuals who share a preference for particular music or partying styles [Hunt et al., this issue], individuals who have been labeled as “high risk” based on previous behavior [Hustad et al., this issue; Kwan et al., this issue]); and *cultural groups defined by the intersectionality of nationality and shared circumstances* (e.g., Hispanic day laborers and agricultural workers [Bletzer et al., this issue; Worby et al., this issue], aging Mexican American injection drug users [Flores et al., this issue]). This diversity in articles highlights the importance of defining culture broadly and recognizing that people define, create, and transform their own cultures. If we had restricted the call to racial or ethnic cultures, we would have excluded all the different subgroups of individuals that coalesce into unique cultures. As Hunt (this issue) notes, frequently a shared behavior or lifestyle is more important than a shared nationality in defining membership in a cultural group. In Hunt's study of Asian American young adults in the nightlife scene, participation in the

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Declaration of Interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

nightlife scene, not Asian American ethnicity, formed the common bond across the participants and drove their activities, beliefs, and priorities. Thus, the challenge remains for researchers to understand the cultural groups with which our research participants identify, not necessarily the cultural groups with which we expect them to identify based on phenotypes such as skin color. Each individual is a member of many different cultures, and it is the individual's choice, not the researcher's, to decide which culture is most salient or defining.

The papers in this special issue coalesce around two main themes. The first theme is *substance use among pre-defined cultural groups*, where the cultural groups are usually defined by the researcher based on their race/ethnicity, place of residence, employment status, or other sociodemographic characteristics. In these papers, membership in a cultural group exists independently of substance use, and the researchers examine variability and commonalities in substance use behavior among the members. For example, some cultural groups examined in this special issue include Latino day laborers (Worby et al., this issue) and agricultural workers (Bletzer et al., this issue) who are living temporarily or permanently in the United States to earn money, typically without legal authorization to do so. Other cultural groups examined in this special issue are people living in ethnic enclaves such as Korean neighborhoods in the U.S. (Huh et al., this issue); or Cambodian communities in the U.S. (Pagano et al., this issue). These studies typically make the assumption that culture influences substance use and seek to identify which aspects of cultural identification (e.g., acculturation, acculturative stress, membership in a subgroup, social influence, and other health behaviors) increase or decrease the risk of substance use (e.g., Grigsby et al., this issue; Lo et al., this issue; Park et al., this issue; Piko et al., this issue; Unger et al., this issue; and Zamboanga et al., this issue).

The second theme is *cultural groups that are defined by their members' similar substance use behaviors*. In these papers, people from diverse demographic groups and backgrounds form new cultures based on their shared interest in substance use. The social norms surrounding the methods and social context of substance use form the definition of a new culture, which may be much more salient to its members than the other demographic-based cultures to which they belong by default. For example, Green et al., (this issue) describe social networks that form, in part, because of members' common use of methamphetamine. Barratt et al., (this issue) and Brown et al. (this issue) describe online social networks that attract substance users to discuss substance use. Hustad et al. (this issue) describe group behaviors such as tailgating and pregameing that explicitly center around substance use. These cultural groups attract new members to meet other people with similar substance use habits, problems, or concerns and form virtual communities. This shared culture provides social support and validation that would not otherwise be available to the individual. Substance use becomes a ticket to entry into the subculture, and individuals who feel marginalized or disenfranchised from other cultural groups may be at especially high risk of seeking acceptance by substance-using cultures. Within a substance-using subculture, behaviors that would elicit disapproval and rejection from the larger social network actually bring social integration and acceptance. In contrast to earlier generations of substance use research, which have classified substance use as a crime or an illness, many of the articles in

this special issue emphasize the substance user's sense of independence and agency; they view substance use as a reasonable, informed choice. Participants in these studies reject the dominant norm that all drug use is harmful and that health should take priority over pleasure or other goals. Cultures based on substance use often have social norms of being nonjudgmental of members and mistrusting outsiders who might try to regulate their substance use, such as physicians and pharmaceutical companies. Shared social norms among in-group members and distrust of out-groups may strengthen the bonds among members even more. Although membership in these cultural groups begins with shared substance use interests and behaviors, the social interactions, (mis) information, knowledge, myth, and experience-sharing among group members may shape members' future substance use behaviors. Extending this point even further, Kwan et al. (this issue) found that group leaders' substance use impacted the substance use of the students assigned to their groups, even though the group existed only temporarily in a school-based program. The potential cultural roles of context and situation, their levels, qualities, and experienced and attributed meanings on a range of substance use as well as nonuse daily functioning and adaptations have not been adequately delineated, considered, or studied.

Additional research is needed to understand the bidirectional relationships between cultural identification and substance use. Several articles in this special issue illustrate how common substance use behaviors can create a shared culture, and how identification with a particular culture can shape future substance use as well as nonuse. Because each individual likely belongs to multiple cultures—each with their own roles, rights, responsibilities, obligations, styles, and dimensions—at a time and the strength of identification with each culture can shift over time, place, and context, and because substance use norms within a cultural group can shift over time, the associations between culture and substance use, as well as nonuse, can become multidimensional, nonlinear, quite complex, as well as time and place bound. However, most researchers continue to limit their studies to either the influence of one or two cultures on substance use or the influence of substances on a culture.

The papers in this special issue also highlight various functional meanings of substance use across cultures, and how these differ according to the individual's and cultural group's position, status, and power, as well as their relative lack, in the socioeconomic and political hierarchy. Several of the papers focus on cultural groups that lack social status, such as undocumented migrant workers—people who have traveled to an unfamiliar culture to earn money but do not have the authorization to work in the new country. These workers are living in unstable housing situations, often in an unfamiliar city or town, and perceive a constant risk of being deported, robbed, or fired. People who are in a marginalized status form groups to provide social support and comradery. Membership in these new groups can provide emotional and instrumental support, thus reducing the need to resort to substance use for self-medication, but these groups can also encourage substance use as well as misuse as a form of social bonding. Among these highly mobile workers living in unstable, unsafe environments, their substance use typically occurs in the environments that they consider to be the safest and most stable. For example, day laborers prefer to drink alcohol at home rather than in bars, and agricultural workers typically resume substance use or try a new substance after they have been to a particular location for a while, rather than while traveling or immediately upon arrival in a new location. Substance use is viewed as a rational

(although probably maladaptive) response to the physical, emotional, and spiritual stress that these workers face. Members of these disadvantaged cultural groups engage in harm reduction behaviors to avoid the direst consequences of substance use.

In contrast, participants in some of the other studies in this special issue live in less precarious circumstances and are buffered, in part, from the most severe consequences of substance use. All “powerless” users of illegal substances face the possibility of legal consequences in addition to health and social consequences of substance use, but the consequences can be less severe for people who are not in danger of immediate deportation, firing, or other extreme consequences. For example, the consequences faced by adolescents experimenting with tobacco or alcohol, college students drinking alcohol on campus, or young adults taking club drugs at a dance club can be serious under certain necessary endogenous and exogenous conditions but usually are not life-altering. Many of the participants in these studies were actively seeking an altered state of consciousness and even a loss of control. Respondents cited the need to drop their social inhibitions, relinquish the need to be in control, and engage in behaviors that would ordinarily be seen as undesirable or even taboo for them. These cultural groups with more societal advantages are “safe” enough to take risks such as substance use. Researchers should consider the relative level of social advantage or disadvantage of each cultural group and how it impacts the members' motivations to stay in control vs. relinquish control by using substances.

It is encouraging to see that research on culture and substance use has moved beyond the simple comparisons across racial and ethnic groups. Earlier studies identified differences across racial or ethnic groups in the prevalence or predictors of substance use, and in the absence of any other explanation, attributed these differences to “culture.” More recent studies, including the ones selected for this special issue, have taken the next step to understand what is inside the black box of “culture” that might influence individuals' decisions about whether to use substances, which substances to use, in what settings and amounts to use them, and even how to interpret their effects. It is important for the field to understand how and why culture and substance use influence one another. Much remains to be understood about the complex and bidirectional relationships between substance use and cultural identification. The studies in this special issue highlight the numerous ways that culture can be defined, the wide variety of social norms about substance use that can develop within cultural groups, and the reciprocal influences between culture and substance use. We hope this special issue will inspire the field to ask more complex relevant questions about this important topic which expand beyond the constraints of “normed,” traditionalized, consensualized, and acculturated study.

Biography

Jennifer B. Unger, Ph.D. is a Professor of Preventive Medicine at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine. She is a member of the Editorial Board of Substance Use and Misuse. Her research interests include the psychological, social, and cultural influences on substance use and other health risk behaviors among adolescents in varying cultural contexts.