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Religious Involvement and Marijuana Use among a Sample of African American Young Adults

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Abstract

Is religiosity associated with African American drug use? Despite the increased research attention that has been devoted to the topic, findings to date have been inconclusive. To address this issue, we analyze data from a sample of 434 young adults residing in Miami-Dade County Florida. We find that, of the four dimensions of religiosity considered here, only religious attendance is inversely related to marijuana use for men and women. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

Religiosity; Marijuana; African American

Introduction

African Americans are disproportionately exposed to a number of risk factors that have been associated with drug use, abuse and dependence. Compared to whites and other ethnic minorities, black American youth are more likely to receive inferior educational opportunities (Roscigno & Ainsworth, 1999; Noguera, 2003), reside in underclass neighborhoods (Lambert, Phillips & Ialongo, 2004), to be raised in single parent households (Sweeny & Raley, 2014; Thomas, Farrell & Barnes, 1996), and to be incarcerated, all of which have been shown to blunt opportunities for upward mobility and perpetuate cycles of social inequality.

Despite these disadvantages, findings from national, state, and local surveys have consistently documented lower rates of drug use among African Americans compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Ellickson & Morton, 1999; Wallace, Brown, Bachman, & Laveist, 2003; Chen & Jacobson, 2012; Rote & Taylor, 2014). However, the social factors that underlie these associations are not yet well understood.

Scholars have speculated that religion may be an important protective factor (Salas-Wright, Vaughn, Hodge & Perron, B. E., 2012). Religious institutions have traditionally been a

cornerstone of African American communities. Africans Americans are much more likely to attend religious and other church related social services compared to other racial/ethnic groups. The church has also served as an important interpersonal mechanism for social control, social learning, and social support (Hill, Burdette, Weiss, & Chitwood 2009).

Further support for the protective role of religion in substance use is based on evidence by prior studies that religious beliefs and practices have been consistently shown to be inversely associated with drug use (Krause 1991; Wallace & Bachman 1991; Herd, 1994; Koenig & Larson 2001; Rote & Stark 2010; Ward, Allen, & Gryczynski 2014; Wallace et al. 2016). However, other studies have shown that the magnitude of the protective effects of religiosity varies by race/ethnicity. For example, Sinha and colleagues (2007) found that religious variables did not mediate the relationship between race and tobacco and alcohol use among African American study participants. Other studies have found that religiosity mediated a greater part of the relationship between race and drug use for whites compared to blacks (Brown, Parks, Zimmerman & Phillips 2001; Wallace et al. 2003; Rote & Stark 2010), while additional research has found the opposite: religion accounted for a greater part of the association of drug use for blacks compared to whites (Herd 1994; Ward, Allen, & Gryczynski 2014).

Research to date has clearly established the following: 1, African Americans are more religious compared to most other racial/ethnic groups in the US; and 2, black youths are less likely to initiate drug use compared to most other racial/ethnic groups. These patterns of findings imply that there may be strong empirical links between African Americans' religious practices and drug use. However, evidence for these associations remains unclear due to the paucity of research on this topic.

The present paper addresses that gap in knowledge by examining the role and significance of four dimensions of religiosity in the prediction of marijuana use among a sample of African American youth residing in Miami-Dade County Florida. Because previous research has identified gender differences in African American religious activity (Donahue 1995) and drug use behaviors (Steinman & Zimmerman 2004), the analyses presented below were conducted separately for males and females.

Methods

Sample Description

This study builds on a previous three-wave investigation based in the Miami-Dade public school system (Vega and Gil 1998). All 48 of the county's public middle schools and all 25 public high schools participated, as did alternative schools. Data were obtained from students in grades 6 and 7, and were gathered again each from these until they reached grades 8 and 9 (Vega and Gil 1998). Consent forms were sent to parents of the total population of 9,763 male students scheduled to enter grades 6 and 7, and to 669 female students from six schools selected to approximate the ethnic composition of all middle schools in the county. Completed questionnaires were obtained from 7,386 of the 10,432 prospective participants at wave 1, 6,646 at wave 2, and from 5,924 at wave 3. Detailed analyses provided assurance that Time 1 participants were highly representative of the

population from which they were drawn; this was also true for the Time 3 participants despite an attrition of nearly 20 percent across the three data points (Vega and Gil 1998).

Within the confines of ethnicity criteria, all female participants in the earlier investigation and a random sample of 1,300 male participants were selected for follow-up. Information on 1,264 of these male prior participants ultimately was released to the field staff. To supplement the sample of females, we employed as the sampling pool the Miami-Dade County grades 6 and 7 class rosters from the year of wave 1 data collection. We randomly selected the names of 1,000 new girls from this pool, and stratified them to achieve the target ethnic distributions. The first 909 of these girls ultimately were sought by field staff members. Overall, 70.1 percent of those we searched for and attempted to recruit to the study were interviewed. By far the greatest loss (41.8%) occurred in the new sample of females, who had no previous involvement in the study.

Data collection for this paper was based on interviews conducted after high school. We succeeded in interviewing 76.4 percent of subjects studied previously. At the time of the follow-up interview, 93 percent of the sample was between 19 and 21 years old.

Comparisons of persons interviewed with the random sample drawn from the original study population revealed no statistically significant differences on a wide array of early adolescent behaviors and family characteristics that are likely to be relevant to mental health and substance use risks. The sample was drawn to achieve roughly equal representation of non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, persons of Cuban heritage, and “other Hispanics.” The focus of this paper is on the relationship between religiosity and marijuana use among African Americans (N=434, males N=243 and female N=191). Also, because important cultural variations obviously exist within ethnic statuses; in an effort to minimize the effects of such variations on results, we excluded from the present analyses respondents who self-reported their ethnic status as African Haitian or African Caribbean. Finally, because of the complexity of the issues involved and because there is a distinct relevant literature regarding Hispanics, we treat in a separate paper the role and significance of stress exposure and drug use among Hispanics.

Measures

Instruments used for data collection are housed at the University of Michigan’s Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/30862>).

Marijuana Use

Because of the low prevalence of marijuana use in this sample lifetime marijuana use was measured by a dichotomous measure where 1 equals previous or current use and abstainers were coded 0.

Preliminary analyses (not presented) assessed the role of religiosity in smoking and drinking. Cigarette use was measured through both (1) lifetime use and (2) whether the respondent is a current smoker. Respondents were asked, “Have you ever smoked more than 10 cigarettes in a single day?” and answers to this lifetime use measure were coded as no=0

or yes=1. The current smoker measure was based on respondents' answer to the question, "Do you smoke now?" (0=no; 1=yes). Alcohol Use: Alcohol use is comprised of past-year use. Past year use is measured by whether the respondent had consumed alcohol in the past year (0=no; 1=yes). Alcohol use was comprised of past-year use. Past year use is measured by whether the respondent had consumed alcohol in the past year (0=no; 1=yes).

Religiosity

Frequency of church attendance was assessed using the question "how often do you attend religious services in a year?" Response categories were, 0 = never, 1 = once or twice a year, 2 = once a month, 3 = weekly attendance, and 4 = more than once a week. Religious coping was assessed by the question "How often do you find comfort in your religion?" Response categories ranged from 0–3, where 0 = "never" 1 = "very little," 2 = "sometimes," and 3 = "a lot." Frequency of prayer was measured by the following question: "do you pray more than usual?" Response categories were coded the same fashion as for the religious coping measure. Finally, church membership is a dichotomous variable asking whether the respondent belonged to a church or synagogue. It was coded no = 0 and yes = 1.

Sociodemographic characteristics

Because individuals in the sample are still making the transition to adulthood, we estimated their socioeconomic status with a composite score based on parents' income level, occupational prestige (Hollingshead, 1957), and educational attainment. We gathered these data from parents' rather than youth's reports, except where we could not obtain interviews with parents. Scores on these three status dimensions were standardized, summed, and divided by the number of status dimensions on which data were available. Student status was coded 1 for those still in school and 0 for those who were not currently enrolled.

Results

Table 1 presents the rates and mean values for men and women for all variables of interest. Tables 2 and 3 present logistic regression models that were computed separately by gender. As shown, men tended to be from slightly higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Consistent with prior research the young men in this study report higher levels of marijuana use (52% compared to 32% for women) and lower levels of religious involvement compared to their female counterparts. However, no significant gender differences were observed across the variables presented.

In Table 2 marijuana was regressed on the variables of interest for men only. In models 2 through 6 each religiosity variable was entered individually and all of these variables were entered simultaneously in the final model. Frequency of attendance ($-.45, p < .001$, model 2) and church membership ($-.72, p < .05$, model 6) were significantly associated with reduced marijuana use when entered individually. In model 7 only frequency of attendance is significantly related to marijuana use. Interestingly, the coefficient for church membership was reduced by about 77 percent from model 6 to model 7 indicating that the protective effects of membership are almost fully mediated or explained away by other religious activities variables.

Table 3 presents a parallel set of regression models as those shown above, but for women only. As before, frequency of church visits was significantly correlated with marijuana use when entered individually (model 2) and in the final model (model 7). Frequency of prayer was marginally associated with marijuana use but this coefficient was reduced to non-significance in the final model, suggesting that frequency of prayer is correlated with the other measures of religiosity that were entered into this regression model.

In additional regression analyses (not shown) alcohol use and tobacco use were regressed on the variables of interest separately by gender. In these analyses none of the religiosity variables were significantly associated with the outcomes of interest.

Discussion

The analysis presented here attempts to address a void in the literature regarding religiosity and the propensity for drug use among African American youths. Although there is a large and growing literature that has focused on the protective effects of religion and adolescent drug use (Bahr & Hoffman, 2008; Wills, Yaeger & Sandy, 2003; Salas-Wright, Vaughn, Hodge & Perron, B. E. 2012), less is known about the linkages between religiosity and Black adolescent and drug use. Furthermore, studies have routinely attempted to find connections between gender and adolescent drug use (Chen & Jacobson, 2012) as well as racial differences in adolescent youth drug and alcohol participation (Ellickson & Morton, 1999; Rote & Taylor, 2014; Wallace, Brown, Bachman, & Laveist, 2003; Chen & Jacobson, 2012). This study specifically explored religious tendencies and its relationship to Black youths' use of marijuana.

With the exception of frequency of religious attendance, the analysis presented above suggests only limited support for the argument that religious practices are protective for African American alcohol and drug use. Moreover, additional analyses (not shown) found that none the religious variables considered here were associated with past year alcohol or lifetime tobacco use. Thus, although African Americans tend to be more religious and are less likely to engage in drug use relative to other racial/ethnic groups, the statistical associations between religiosity and marijuana use presented in the present analyses are relatively weak.

A recent review of the literature (Chitwood, Weiss, & Leukefeld 2008) found that about a third of the studies on religion and substance use relied on a single measure of religiosity and over half of all previous studies operationalized religiosity in terms of religious attendance. These authors also note that, to date, "neither the conceptualization nor the measurement of religiosity have been standardized by the field (Chitwood, Weiss, & Leukefeld 2008: 663). The findings presented here suggest that religious behaviors have little bearing on the drug use of these study participants. However, it may also be that the measures of religious involvement and attitudes employed here may not fully capture the protective aspects of religious behaviors that are associated with abstinence from drug use.

When assessing these findings, two additional limitations should be noted. First, the study population was drawn from Miami-Dade County Florida and may not be representative of

African American adolescent youth residing in other large metropolitan areas. Second, this study relied on cross-sectional data, which does not allow assessments of temporal ordering and changes behaviors over time.

Based on the limitations discussed above we encourage future research to implement longitudinal study designs that capture multiple religious behaviors at ages that generally precede the onset of drug use. This will yield a much clearer picture of role of religiosity on the onset and continuation of drug use over the early life course and allow more insight into which aspects of religiosity are most protective. Acquiring this information is crucial to informing effective prevention and intervention efforts.

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Table 1.

Rates and Mean Values of all Study Variables, by Gender

	Men	Women
Marijuana Use	0.52	0.32
SES	2.18	1.82
Student = 1	0.56	0.48
Frequency of Attendance	3.09	3.31
Religious Coping	2.66	2.74
Frequency of Prayer	2.72	3.00
Church Member = 1	0.51	0.63

*
 $p < .05$

**
 $p < .01$

 $p < .001$

Table 2.

Marijuana Use Regressed on Statistical Controls and Religious Variables (Men only)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
SES	-.13	-.01	-.14	-.16	-.09	-.04	-.00
Student = 1	-.57 *	-.54	-.54	-.54	-.53	-.58 *	-.54
Freq. Attendance		-.45 ***					-.40 *
Religious Coping			-.11				.10
Freq Pray				-.55			-.20
Church Member = 1						-.72 *	-.17
Constant	.70	1.82 ***	1.00	1.40 *	.03	.88 *	1.88
R ₂	.02	.06	.02	.03	.03	.04	.07

*
 $p < .05$ **
 $p < .01$ ***
 $p < .001$

Table 3.

Marijuana Use Regressed on Statistical Controls and Religious Variables (Women only)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
SES	.12	.14	.15	.10	.15	.13	.08
Student = 1	-.01	.14	.09	-.05	.04	.03	.00
Freq. Attendance		-.41 *					-.48 *
Religious Coping			-.29				-.05
Freq Pray				-.34 *			-.30
Religiosity					.17		-.12
Church Member = 1						-.17	.53
Constant	-.93 *	.27	-.27	.13	-1.44 *	-.87	1.64
R ₂	.00	.03	.02	.02	.00	.00	.05

*
 $p < .05$ **
 $p < .01$ ***
 $p < .001$