

An Assessment of the Risk Factors Associated with Substance Abuse among South African Adolescents

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ABSTRACT Increasing numbers of South African adolescents are engaging in substance abuse, a social ill which is approaching epidemic proportions, despite concerted efforts by the South African government to provide effective preventative measures and treatment. As the aim of this paper was to identify and investigate the risk factors which encourage South African adolescents to become initiated into substance abuse, a systematic and comprehensive review of relevant available literature was conducted. The literature revealed that substance abuse by adolescents is prompted by individual, family, and environmental factors. From the conclusions which have been drawn from the findings of the study, it is suggested that drug testing should be carried out in schools and psycho-educational support should be provided to learners who have fallen prey to substance abuse and their families, in order to increase the effectiveness of the prevention programmes which are being implemented at present.

INTRODUCTION

The epidemic of substance abuse among South African adolescents has assumed alarming proportions and is widely perceived to be spiralling out of control. The South African Central Drug Authority (2011) has estimated that one in every two school children have already been initiated into the use of drugs. Research has shown that adolescents start experimenting with drugs as early as twelve years of age (Thomson 2015). A report by the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (SANCA 2014) has revealed that more than sixty percent of teenagers of 18 years of age regularly engage in substance abuse, with alcohol being the most commonly abused substance by teenagers, although other substances such as cannabis are also used by many young people. A study which was conducted in 2013 in the United States found that 97.3 percent of the young people who consumed alcohol had access to it without needing to pay for it. Consequently, it would appear to be entirely plausible that significant numbers of the youth of South Africa would also have access to free alcohol, owing to the lifestyles of their parents. The report of the South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (SACENDU) for 2017 re-

vealed that twenty-nine percent of young people in the province of Gauteng between the ages of 10 and 19 years were registered in various treatment centres in the province (SACENDU 2017). In addition, Dada et al. (2018) estimate that eleven percent of the South African population, of the order of 5.7 million people, will fall prey to an addiction problem in their lifetimes. Although the dangers of substance abuse have been comprehensively documented, they are significantly increased when young people engage in it (Holborn and Eddy 2011; Kheswa 2015; Kheswa and Tikimana 2015). Consequently, this research paper has been embarked upon in order to assess the risk factors which are associated with the initiation into substance abuse among the youth of South Africa. The risk factors are classified into three categories in the sections which follow.

Research Objectives

The research study was conducted in order to:

- ◆ Identify and investigate the risk factors which are associated with substance abuse among South African adolescents.
- ◆ Identify and suggest possible measures by means of which substance abuse can be contained and combated.

Statement of the Problem

As the use of drugs by young people in South Africa, particularly by black adolescents, is reckoned by many informed commentators to be spiralling out of control, it has become an urgent priority to investigate and assess all of the risk factors which are associated with and encourage substance use among South African adolescents. Research from diverse sources has shown that the ages at which children and adolescents begin experimenting with drugs has continued to drop and that it is no longer uncommon for experimentation to begin as young as 12 years old (Reddy et al. 2010; SANCA 2014; Department of Social Development National Drug Master Plan 2013-2017). For this reason, it is imperative that all the dynamics pertaining to the various different risk factors which are associated with substance abuse by adolescents should be appropriately investigated, assessed, and understood. Without doing so, it is impossible to formulate adequate preventative measures or to enable adolescents who are vulnerable to falling prey to substance abuse to avail themselves of the prevention programmes which are being implemented throughout the country at present.

METHODOLOGY

The study upon which this research paper is based took the form of a review of the relevant available literature, which consisted of sets of data, books, and journals, in order to identify the risk factors which are likely to encourage substance abuse among young people. The value of a literature review for conducting a preparatory exploratory study to provide the necessary orientation for a subsequent in-depth study lies in the fact that it does not require the formalities which are entailed in obtaining ethical approval, as it does not require the participation of human beings.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Risk Factors Associated with Initiation into Substance Abuse

In the sections which follow, the risk factors are discussed in terms of factors which affect individual adolescents, factors which result from

family circumstances, and environmental risk factors.

Individual Risk Factors

Gender

There is substantial evidence to suggest that gender exerts a definite influence upon the likelihood that adolescents will engage in substance abuse. Various studies have found a greater propensity among male adolescents to engage in substance abuse than their female counterparts (Reddy et al. 2010; Peltzer et al. 2010). Despite these findings, other researchers have suggested that the tendencies of male dominance in some parts of South Africa has resulted in females resorting to substance use as a response to the effects of perceived inequality (Wechsberg et al. 2014). In addition, the findings of other studies have suggested that females may be born more susceptible to abusing drugs than males, owing to the presence of the gonadal hormone oestrogen (Anker and Carroll 2010). Anker and Carroll (2010) maintain that high levels of oestrogen during the female menstrual cycle have been positively correlated with the abuse of substances such as cocaine and amphetamine by women. They contend that epidemiological research, behavioural pharmacological research, and other research disciplines have tended to neglect factors which may encourage drug use among women, such as ovarian hormones, because their studies have tended to be primarily concerned with substance abuse by males. By contrast, Becker (2012) maintain that males are more likely to experience the effects of withdrawal from substance abuse than females and, in order to cope with them, to increase their intakes of the substances which they have been abusing. Peltzer et al. (2011) maintain that the socio-demographic factors which are likely to trigger substance abuse include but are not limited to gender, youth, and specific population groups. According to Peltzer and Phaswana-Mafuya (2018), males tend to predominate in the numbers of clients who seek treatment in drug treatment centres across South Africa. While women are more likely to seek treatment for the abuse of socially acceptable drugs such as alcohol and over-the-counter and prescription drugs than men, men are more likely to seek treatment for illegal drugs such as heroin although, in a study

which was conducted in the United States, it was found that the number of women who seek treatment for substance abuse, including heroin addiction, are likely to be equal to those of men (Cicero et al. 2014). The implications of this finding for South African women, particularly black female adolescents from poverty-stricken backgrounds, should not be overlooked. Gender vulnerability needs to be prioritised with respect to substance abuse in South Africa, in order to develop new preventative programmes to cater for the needs of this particularly vulnerable sector of South African society.

Genetic Factors

An accumulating body of evidence from diverse sources suggests that genetic factors contribute significantly to both initiation into substance abuse and the transition from occasional use to addiction, and also, significantly, to tendencies to relapse (Bevilacqua and Goldman 2009). Although relevant literature reveals that the nature of the drug which is used determines the likelihood of addiction, Szalavitz (2015) estimates that fifty percent of the risk of addiction is genetic in nature. In addition, the findings of a study of the influence of genetic factors upon addiction suggest that the risk of individual people falling prey to substance abuse and addiction is influenced by genetic relationships with people who are addicted (Cadet et al. 2016). Similar findings emerged from a study which was conducted among twins and adopted children, which revealed that genetic dispositions contributed to the use of addictive drugs such as alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs (Kendler et al. 2012). In another study, which was conducted among identical twins, fraternal twins, adoptees, and siblings, it was found that the genetic makeup of individual people contributed an estimated half of the risk of becoming initiated into the use of addictive substances such as alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs, including illegal drugs. It needs to be emphasised at this point that the evidence which has been derived from studies of families and twins suggests that although there is no specific gene which could be conclusively proven to promote addictive behaviour, it appeared to be plausible that numerous combinations of genes could do so (Agrawal and Lynskey 2008; Hartz and Bierut 2010). As the evidence which has been obtained from the

research studies which have been conducted to date suggests that the use of substances varies from person to person and is influenced by factors such as gender and age, genetic influence could be specific to particular developmental stages (Hartz and Bierut 2010).

Although no scientific evidence has been found, so far, to prove that genetic factors can motivate initiation into drug abuse, research has identified a specific protein which appears to exert a definite influence upon addictive behaviour, learning, and memory (Volkow et al. 2011). This finding could account for the fact that numerous studies of substance abuse have concluded that the use of particular drugs tends to contribute to memory loss. The research pertaining to the PSD-95 protein suggests that people who have abnormally low levels of the protein are particularly sensitive to cocaine and particularly likely to develop long-term unconscious memories of the reward which the drug provides and to escalate their use of it, while people with normal levels of PSD-95 are likely to have only short-term memories of the reward and are consequently less likely to become addicted to cocaine. From the evidence which these studies have provided, there can be little doubt that the biological makeup of individual people exerts a profound influence upon their individual propensities for addictive behaviour. Although the studies which have been cited have referred specifically to the abuse of cocaine, it needs to be emphasised that a wide range both of legal and illegal drugs can be highly addictive.

As the acquisition of scientific knowledge pertaining to the influence of genetic and physiological factors upon addictive behaviour is in its infancy, a great deal more research would need to be carried out before treatment programmes or therapy could be developed which take genetic factors into account. The identification of specific genes which predispose people to substance abuse could facilitate the development of new drug prevention programmes.

Low Self-esteem and Poor Social Skills

Self-esteem or the lack of it undoubtedly motivate human behaviour to a very great extent. The perceptions which adolescents have of themselves play an equally significant role in the ways in which they choose to express them-

selves in social situations. Young people who have low self-esteem tend to limit their contact with others and even to disengage from members of their immediate families or other loved ones. In some instances, their feelings of withdrawal and alienation can find expression in negative and even self-destructive forms of behaviour such as substance abuse. Many studies of low self-esteem and substance abuse among adolescents have yielded similar findings and resulted in researchers concluding that there is a strong correlation among adolescents between low self-esteem and substance abuse. According to Khajehdaloue et al. (2013), young people who suffer from low self-esteem are particularly prone to abuse substances such as alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, mandrax, crack, crystal meth, and even heroin. They maintain that the majority of adolescents in drug treatment centres have low self-esteem and suggest that a lack of self-esteem could act as a triggering factor in their initiation into substance abuse, in order to gain the acceptance of their peers. There is a considerable body of research which suggests that adolescent females who have low self-esteem may look to others for affirmation and have multiple sexual partners and engage in substance abuse as a result (Kalina et al. 2011; Brooks et al. 2012; Ugoji 2014). In addition, adolescents who have low self-esteem are likely to lack the social skills to interact with their peers, often for fear of offending them, and to engage in substance abuse to boost their self-esteem.

By contrast, Wheeler (2010) suggests that although adolescent girls who have high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence may not be attracted to substance abuse, they may have a precocious awareness of their own sexuality, which they may attempt to express in situations with which they are not sufficiently emotionally mature to cope. Kounenou (2010) suggests that young people who have high self-esteem are more likely than those whose self-esteem is low to avoid risky types of behaviour such as substance abuse, owing to the guidance which they receive from their schooling and from conscientious and attentive parents, and also to affluent socioeconomic circumstances. Relevant research also suggests that low self-esteem not only increases the vulnerability of adolescents to drug abuse, but also increases the likelihood of behavioural disorders and criminal tendencies. McMurrin (2012) has provided substantial evi-

dence that offenders generally have low self-esteem, do not consider themselves to possess any intrinsic worth or merit, feel unloved, and very often engage in substance abuse, with some doing so prior to engaging in criminal activities.

According to McMurrin (2012), low self-esteem among adolescents is strongly correlated with excessive consumption of alcohol and habitual users of cannabis also tend to have lower self-esteem and to exhibit poorer moral judgement than non-users. As the consequences of low self-esteem are extremely negative for adolescents and can range from financial difficulties, which result from a lack of motivation to pursue a viable career, to engaging in various forms of risky behaviour such as substance abuse and promiscuity, it may be concluded that substance abuse among adolescents is symptomatic of more deep-seated psychological problems which need to be treated and overcome for the sake of the well-being of individual societies.

The Adolescent Phase

The phase of adolescence marks the transition from childhood to early adulthood and is often characterised by the emergence of a unique personal identity and a diminishing of relationships of dependency with parents, in favour of relationships with peers. As relationships with peers become increasingly significant in the social interactions of adolescents, if they are not sufficiently monitored in a discreet and non-intrusive manner, adolescents are vulnerable to the influence of peers, which can result in forays into sexual experimentation or substance abuse. Researchers such as Nduna et al. (2013) and Kheswa and Tikimana (2015) explain that during adolescence young people are likely to form groups through which their individual emerging identities are expressed. Consequently, the more strongly an individual adolescent associates himself or herself with a group which engages in risky or anti-social behaviour, the greater will be the likelihood that the adolescent concerned may engage in illicit behaviour, such as experimentation with drugs, as a result of the perceived norms and identity of the group which he or she has joined. It is generally held that during this period most adolescents conform to the norms of their social groups for recognition and affirmation.

According to Kendler et al. (2011), the initiation of adolescents into substance abuse is prompted by social influences which are inherent in the social fabric of their lives and tend gradually to wane as they progress from early to young and middle adulthood. It could be contended that young people who have not discovered and come to terms with their personal identities during their formative years are particularly likely to continue to adhere to the behavioural examples of their peer groups during their transitions from adolescence to early adulthood. The role which parents play in mediating the influence of peer groups upon their children who are making the transition from adolescence to early adulthood is a crucial one. In those instances in which parents retain close relationships with their children during late adolescence and are on friendly terms with their close friends and their children have good relationships with their teachers, destructive forms of behaviour such as substance abuse are likely to be far less common than they are among adolescents who have more distant relationships with their families, whose parents do not interact with their peers, and whose relationships with their teachers are poor (Kendler et al. 2012). According to Kendler et al. (2012), adolescents who participate in family activities are significantly less likely to engage in substance abuse than those who do not.

Risk Factors which Result from Family Circumstances

Dysfunctional Households

The lives of dysfunctional families are frequently characterised by poor conduct on the part of both parents and children, physical and emotional abuse, and general neglect. Tensions are often aggravated by financial difficulties which arise as a result of low incomes and expressed through constant conflicts between parents, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, and in many instances, ultimately, separation or divorce (Holt 2011). Children who grow to adolescence in dysfunctional families are likely to perceive deviant and destructive behaviour as being completely normal, which has extremely adverse implications for their own behaviour in terms of the social learning theory of Albert Bandura, in which adolescents learn behavioural

patterns though modelling. There is also a substantial amount of evidence in the relevant available literature to suggest that adolescents who are cared for by single parents as a result of divorce, separation, or the death of one parent, are likely to be more vulnerable to substance abuse than adolescents who are raised by both of their biological parents (Kendler et al. 2012; Kheswa 2015).

Child Abuse

Many studies which have sought to investigate the relationship between substance abuse and child abuse have concluded that substance abuse by adults correlates significantly with the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children (Nduna et al. 2013; Kheswa 2015). The WHO fact sheet points out that the excessive use of alcohol and other drugs by parents and guardians limits their ability to comport themselves with the degree of responsibility which is required to ensure the well-being of the children who are in their care. Substance abuse not only impairs their ability to exercise self-control, but is also likely to result in the children being subjected to aggressive and violent behaviour. There is a considerable amount of evidence to confirm that the abuse of narcotic substances by parents or guardians reduces the degree of nurturing contact which they have with their children, apart from the great likelihood that money which should be spent on the basic needs of the children would be used to purchase the substances which are abused (McCoy and Keen 2009). Studies have also shown that unsupervised or neglected children are far more likely to engage in damaging behaviour, such as abusing alcohol or drugs, than children who enjoy stable and nurturing relationships with their parents (Kopko 2009). It is also entirely plausible that children who are subjected to abuse would be at a very high risk of resorting to substance abuse themselves, as a means of coping with the situations in which they feel themselves to be trapped.

Studies which have sought to investigate the effects of being subjected to child abuse have shown that child abuse has severely negative consequences for children, as they inevitably tend to suffer from psychological problems, which can, in turn, result in many turning to substance abuse (Moylan et al. 2010; Garner

et al. 2014). Kotov et al. (2010) explain that there are also usually adverse developmental and psychological implications of child abuse, such as retarded cognitive development and emotional problems which result in severe anxiety and depression, which increase the likelihood of engaging in destructive behaviour, such as sexual promiscuity and the excessive use of alcohol and other addictive drugs. In a study which was conducted by Sousa et al. (2011), it was found that victims of child abuse and neglect are more likely to smoke, consume alcohol, and even abuse illegal drugs during adolescence than children and adolescents who have not been subjected to abuse. Research has also generated evidence to suggest that boys who have survived child abuse are particularly prone to using intravenous drugs, in some instances (Wang et al. 2010; Rich et al. 2016).

Homeless Adolescents

The phenomenon of homeless adolescents is rampant in South Africa. In 2014, the Consortium for Street Children reported that approximately 250 000 young people in South Africa are classified as street children and that a significant portion of them have experimented with addictive drugs and engaged in risky sexual activities as a means of survival. A report which was published by UNICEF in 2015 estimated that there could be tens of millions of homeless children and adolescents in both the developing and developed countries. According to Nyamathi et al. (2010), as the lives of homeless adolescents are plagued by poverty, a lack of support, and exposure to violence and crime, many resort to substance abuse as a means of self-medication, maintaining social connections with peers, and as a coping strategy. Embleton et al. (2013) and Hills et al. (2016) maintain that in order to survive, they are often obliged to and are particularly likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour and levels of substance abuse tend to be particularly high among them, with estimated averages of sixty and ninety-five percent respectively.

Studies which have been conducted of homeless adolescents have suggested that although they frequently display both resilience and recklessness, they are also prone to even suicidal levels of depression. In a study conducted among homeless adolescents, it was found that their vulnerability to attempting or committing

suicide was three times greater than that of their peers who have homes (Greydanus and Shek 2009). Homeless adolescents who have survived suicide attempts are also more likely to resort to excessive use of alcohol and illicit drugs as a means of coping with their homelessness (Kolar et al. 2012). Embleton et al. (2013) maintain that homeless young South Africans sniff glue and consume alcohol for the feelings of well-being and invulnerability which the activities provide, and also to fight the feelings of loneliness, hunger, and insecurity which result from living on the streets. These findings are consistent with those of Hills et al. (2016), which revealed that some of the participants in their study admitted that they used drugs as a means of coping with living on the streets and derived most of their pleasure from smoking, drinking, and enjoying themselves in bars.

There can be no doubt that homelessness is a significant factor which is associated with South African young people becoming initiated into drug abuse. As the report of the Human Sciences Research Council HSRC (2008) has revealed that most of the homeless youth in South Africa are male black adolescents, it may be concluded that the distribution of homeless young South Africans skewed along both racial and gender lines. Owing to their lack of a fixed abode, it is difficult for the government, policy makers, and the non-governmental sector to assess their needs and draw up a policy framework in order to improve their circumstances and ensure their well-being. Although some NGOs provide services such as the providing of clothing to homeless people, it has been reported that very few have actually benefited from these services.

Environmental Risk Factors

The Cultural Desirability of Narcotic Substances and Environmental Factors which Encourage their Use

It is generally accepted that, to a very large extent, cultures form and guide the behaviour and practices of people. In South Africa, the smoking of cannabis was widespread and generally perceived to be an integral component of the cultures of traditional communities. As the practice was always governed and controlled by very strict rules, which were usually applied by tribal elders, younger children had very limit-

ed access to cannabis. By contrast, as traditional beliefs have given way to the norms of the modern world, the rules which were applied which prevented adolescents having access to cannabis and other illicit substances have fallen into disuse (Salous and Omar 2010). The ever-decreasing adherence to cultural values has been accompanied by correspondingly increased levels of substance abuse. In one South African study, a strong correlation was found between adolescent substance abuse and prevailing cultural norms, with most of the participants believing that substance abuse was culturally desirable (Hathaway et al. 2011).

Research has demonstrated quite conclusively that culture significantly influences the extents to which drugs are used and abused and also the ways in which they are perceived by societies (Unger 2014). Heath (2012) defines culture as a system of patterns of belief and behaviour which shape the worldviews of individual members of societies. From this definition, it may be advanced that if the cultural beliefs of a particular society held that alcohol and other drugs such as cannabis were not harmful to young people, their use would be unlikely to be frowned upon and, in some instances, may even be encouraged. Heath (2012) maintains that in societies in which substances such as alcohol and cannabis are perceived to be culturally desirable, their use by young people is likely to be widespread. They also suggest that knowledge of the dangers which are inherent in substance abuse by young people and the reinforcing of healthy behaviour by communities have been found to be associated with relatively low levels of substance abuse among young people. The fact that the Indian culture does not encourage the use of any narcotic substances could explain why an Indian study found no significant relationship between cultural beliefs and substance abuse among adolescents (Thomson 2015). Consequently, the role which cultural beliefs and perceptions play in the degree to which drugs are used in societies needs to be properly evaluated and assessed, in order to enable them to serve as preventative measures against substance abuse by adolescents.

Poor School Attendance

One of the consistent findings in research into substance abuse among adolescents is that

children whose attendance at school is poor are particularly likely to engage in drug-related and criminal activities and eventually to drop out of school. A considerable amount of evidence which has been derived from research has shown a strong correlation between using cannabis at a young age and low levels of educational attainment, in terms of both the numbers of years of education which are successfully completed and dropping out of high school (McCaffrey et al. 2010; Holborn and Eddy 2011; Tshitangano and Tosin 2016). These findings tend to support the conclusion that the impaired academic performance of adolescents who use cannabis results from diminished learning abilities as a consequence of memory loss. Other researchers have also suggested that low academic aspirations and poor performance at school correlate strongly with the consumption of alcohol (Heath 2012). According to McCaffrey et al. (2010), poor performance at school should not be excluded from the factors which encourage adolescents to engage in substance abuse. Feelings of hopelessness, apathy, and despair are more likely to encourage than discourage substance abuse. Research has shown that adolescents are likely to engage in substance abuse in order to boost their self-confidence and out of a need to confront failure with displays of bravado among peers with whom they share an outward scorn for academic success (Hills et al. 2016).

CONCLUSION

There is a great deal of evidence to corroborate an assessment that substance abuse by adolescents is rampant and widespread in South Africa, as it has been confirmed that many children begin experimenting with illicit substances as young as 10 years of age. The literature which has been reviewed has provided compelling evidence that individual factors, family circumstances, and environmental factors contribute significantly to the use of substances by adolescents in South Africa. The evidence suggests that male adolescents are particularly at risk of engaging in excessive substance abuse. It is also evident that children who are abused, live on the street, or grow up in dysfunctional households which are characterised by divorce and violence are particularly prone to resort to abusing of alcohol and illicit drugs as a means of

coming to terms with their situations. Children who fall into these categories are also particularly likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour. It is the considered opinion of the researcher that in view of the risk factors which have been identified in this paper, it is imperative that a more comprehensive overall strategy should be formulated and implemented to combat substance abuse among South African adolescents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Responses to Substance Abuse among Adolescents

The government of South Africa has introduced various preventative measures to combat substance abuse, most of which are educational in nature, such as once-off visits to schools to educate learners concerning the dangers and negative consequences of substance abuse. Owing to the steadily increasing numbers of children and adolescents who engage in substance abuse and their inherent vulnerability, it is recommended that school-based social workers or members of other relevant professions should be employed in schools. They could provide invaluable assistance in identifying children who live in dysfunctional households and those who are victims of child abuse. Appropriate interventions could significantly counteract the likelihood of the children falling prey to substance use. Random drug tests should be carried out in schools and learners who test positive should be referred to drug prevention practitioners. The treatment which is provided by practitioners should include formal engagement with the families of the learners, in order to diagnose the specific risk factors to which the individual learners are most vulnerable. Psycho-educational support should be provided to both the learners and their families, in accordance with the specific risk factors to which each individual learner is vulnerable. The researcher also recommends the establishment of government-funded drop-in centres to which homeless adolescents have easy access. Alleviating the harsh conditions to which homeless young people are subjected could mitigate the likelihood of their falling prey to substance use and other social ills. It is only through the adoption of a proactive approach that substance abuse among ad-

olescents could potentially be effectively contained and combated.

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