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Marjorie Grefer

The Consequences of Early Onset Alcohol Experimentation: Adaptive Exploration or Downward Trajectory

Underage drinking is a growing problem for today's youth, one that has generated considerable research interest. Important questions remain about how the age at which individuals begin experimenting with substances influences later patterns of use. While it seems that individuals who experiment early would be at a significantly greater risk for later substance use disorders than those who abstain from substance use, research in this area has not found consistent results. In previous studies, researchers found that those students who partook in occasional experimentation with substances tend to have led healthier, more typical developmental trajectories, whereas those who abstained had highly restrictive personalities, which may prevent them from having a normal social development. In contrast, a more recent longitudinal study found that participants who reported heavy or experimental use in the tenth grade reported significantly more symptoms at age twenty than individuals who had abstained from substance use.

My research aims to investigate the age of onset of alcohol use in college students. My study will focus on the substance use trajectories of individuals from three age of onset categories: those who started using substances at a very early age in adolescence, those who started using substances at a later age in adolescence, and those who have never used substances during their teenage years. In addition to age of onset, I am further going to categorize individuals by the frequency of their substance use in their freshman year of college. To categorize these individuals, the study will compare moderate drinking versus those students who have episodes of binge drinking. These groups (age of onset, frequency of use) will be compared to examine various outcome measures, including depression, grade point average, and friendships.

Following the transition to college, students are in a new environment, often away from their parents and previous home life, and make decisions and living choices on their own. These decisions are often heavily influenced by one's peers; as such, I will also examine how participants' networks of friends and their friends' patterns of alcohol use may relate to alcohol use trajectories. Based upon previous research, I hypothesize that individuals with early-onset substance use and current frequent substance use will be most at risk for mental health and academic problems, and will have friends who approve of or even encourage substance use, making this group the most

maladjusted of the groups. I predict that abstainers will be the most well-adjusted individuals, and the experimenters to fall in between the early users and abstainers with regard to mental health and academic outcomes.

Alcohol misuse is an increasingly serious issue for adolescents as they enter their freshman year in college. By giving special attention to factors that impact students' alcohol use in this crucial adjustment period, I hope to identify possible avenues for reducing risky, problem drinking.

In terms of my work so far this summer, I have begun working on the foundation of my research – the background reading. I have been reading, analyzing, and discussing relevant journal articles with my advisor. A main objective of this reading has been to look into how others have previously defined user types, especially the groups “abstainer,” “experimenter,” and “heavy user.” I have been helping the Center for Drug and Alcohol Research Translation Project 3 team with their physiological data analysis, working on getting all of the collected data coded and ready to be examined. In the upcoming months I will be meeting with a collaborating statistics professor to discuss the best strategies for modeling drinking trajectories with our data, as well as to develop an analytic plan for addressing the primary research questions for my study. Following the summer, I will be working with the background information and data for the following year as I further develop the project for a senior honors thesis within the psychology department.