

Research Article

Substance use Risk Factors and the Results of Substance use Behaviors: A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Substance Users

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Abstract

Substance use is an important public health problem that needs to be prevented and intervened. Identifying the risk factors that lead to substance use behaviors and identifying the biopsychosocial problems caused by substance use behavior are important in order to cope with this problem. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the reasons that lead individuals to substance use, their life experiences of substance use behaviors, and the biopsychosocial problems related to substance use using the document analysis method. For this purpose, 50 males were studied who were participating in addiction group work and who had been directed to probation services. The participants were asked about their life experiences related to substance use behaviors, their reasons for beginning substance use, which factors led them into substance use, and what pros and cons were in their lives after they had begun using substances. The participants' answers were analyzed through the traditional content analysis method, a qualitative research method. According to the results, the most important risk factors that cause individuals to use substances are found to be family system, adolescence, peer and friend influence, stress and weakened coping mechanisms, loss of a significant object and mourning, accessibility and curiosity about a substance. Moreover, substance users stated that after they had begun using substances, they had to cope with psychosocial problems such as academic problems, family problems, social exclusion, depression, and suicide attempts. According to the results, many risk factors should be taken into consideration to prevent substance use behaviors, and intervention and rehabilitation studies should be planned and implemented in a holistic perspective.

Keywords

Substance use • Addiction • Reasons for substance use • Results of substance use • Qualitative research

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Substance use behaviors, an important public-health problem, are increasing day by day in Turkey as in the rest of the world. The increase in substance use behavior is clearly seen when analyzing statistics (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNDOC], 2013). For example, substance use behaviors, including high-purity drugs, have increased almost two-fold every year in Turkey (Kulaksızoğlu, Kulaksızoğlu, Ellidağ, Yılmaz, & Bozkurt, 2015).

Many studies have investigated the etiology and underlying risk factors of substance use behaviors. Studies have shown that substance use behaviors cannot be explained by a single risk factor but that a combination of many biological, psychological, and social factors leads individuals to substance use (Gorsuch & Butler, 1976; Stone, Becker, Huber, & Catalano, 2012). Studies have shown the most important risk factors for substance use behaviors are childhood trauma and abuse (Dube et al., 2003), family problems, substance use behavior in family members (Chassin, Pillow, Curran, Molina, & Barrera, 1993), and psychological problems (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2006). The impact of peers and friends has been stated as critical in adolescents learning and internalizing substance use behaviors (Lundborg, 2006; McDonough, Sabiston, & Wrosch, 2014).

Coping with substance use behaviors is an important problem for Turkey and has become very difficult to deal with. Therefore, determining substance use risk factors, increasing scientific studies on this subject, and developing prevention and intervention studies are important. As such, the aim of the study is to investigate the life experiences of substance users who are in the probation system. For this purpose, the reasons individuals lead to the use of substances and the pros and cons in their lives after beginning to use substances have been investigated using the qualitative research method from a psychosocial perspective. In addition, the results of the risk factors for substance use behaviors and the results of substance use behaviors have been analysed using document analysis and content analysis from the participants' own expressions.

Method

Document analysis method which is one of the qualitative research method, was used in this study. The content analysis method was used to determine the themes. Participants were asked to write a text about substance use behaviors and substance use life experiences. The participants were asked two questions and were informed that they are free to write whatever they want. Each text written by the participants has been provided in quotation marks without any modification; the participants have been numbered, and statements indicate which participant it belongs to in parentheses. The participants' statements were translated as they wrote. The questions are as follows:

1. What were your reasons for using substance? What factors led you to use the substance?
2. What positive or negative experiences did you have in your life after you began substance use?

Sample

The study has been carried out over 50 substance users who had been directed to Ankara Probation Services and been proven to be using substances.

Data Analysis

The study's data was analysed using the content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). According to the results, seven themes were determined as the reasons for beginning substance use: family factors, negative peer and friend effect, adolescence period, stress and weakening of coping mechanism, significant loss and mourning, substance abuse in the environment, and lastly accessibility and curiosity. The study's findings are detailed below.

Results

Sample Description

The participants' demographic and psychosocial characteristics have been examined, with participants' mean age being 34.44, 55.8% of the participants were single, and 41.9% primary school, 28.9% were secondary school graduates and 53.5% were unemployed. When examining the results of their criminal behavior, 58.1% of the participants were found to have committed a crime and 4.9% to have committed a violent crime, 25% of the participants were involved in a crime while under the influence of a drug. In addition, 27.9% of the participants in the sample had attempted suicide at least once in their lives. When examining the results related to substance use, 7% of the subjects were found to have used a substance before the age of 12, 39.5% of them had begun using between ages of 12-17, and 39.5% of them began to use substances between the ages of 18-25. Of the participants, 58.1% were found to have used more than one substance, 25.6% to have substance use among family members, and 76.7% to have substance use behaviors among friends. When examining the type of substance used by participants, cannabis use is found to be the most common at 97.6%, 72.6% of the participants have used ecstasy, 18.6% have used heroin, 20.9% have used cocaine, and 39.5% have used alcohol.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative findings about the reasons of participants began substance use.

This section examines the life experiences of substance users and risk factors that led them to substance use.

Family system. Many studies have shown the negative effects of family problems on substance use behaviors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Telzer, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2014). The effects of negative factors such as substance use behavior in the family and domestic violence or criminal behavior among family members have been emphasized on substance use behaviors. In particular, poor parental interest, poor communication between parents and children, and a negative parenthood model are negative factors for substance use behavior (Eshelman, Messman-Moore, & Sheffer, 2015; Espelage, Low, Rao, Hong, & Little, 2014). Criminal behavior among family members is another important risk factor for substance use behavior (Dishion & Loeber, 1985; Sokol-Katz, Dunham, & Zimmerman, 1997). One participant expressed the negative impact of domestic problems, poor family support, and poor family interest on his substance use behavior as follows:

I had a lot of family problems at that time. As soon as I was born, my parents left me, and my grandmother looked after me. When I was a kid, I always prayed that I had a mother and father. Parents' love is important. I didn't experience it. It's strange not to have parents' love. I was crying every day. My friends were drinking. They had a lot of fun while drinking. I thought I'd have fun, I'd forget my troubles. I've made a mistake. (42)

Adolescence. The riskiest period for substance use behavior is stated to be adolescence. Studies have shown substance use behavior among adolescents to be increasing daily with the age of substance use behavior getting lower (SAMHSA, 2006). One participant stated adolescence as an important risk factor for substance use behavior.

I began to use drugs when I was 15, I was a child. I drank because of pleasures or troubles. I was recommended to use drugs and I had been drinking. Although I am still not addicted, I sometimes continue to drink with my friends. (16)

Family and peer effect. Peer relations and friendships are an important factor in how adolescents form their values, attitudes, and behaviors. One of the most important reasons for substance use behavior is the friendship and peer effect, it is very critical to substance use behavior, especially during adolescence (Mason, Mennis, Linker, Bares, & Zaharakis, 2014; McDonough, Jose, & Stuart, 2016). Another important factor is the effect of romantic relations on substance use. According to this, an individual uses a substance or tries to use a substance to be accepted by the person with whom one has or wants to have a romantic relationship. Participants also refer to negative peer and friend impacts as reasons for beginning substance use.

I began to use the substance in my social environment. They said that I try to use the substance once, it doesn't make me addicted. But that's not true. It is very easy to start but once you try

it you can not stop using it. When family and money problems were added, I found myself using substance. I can't stop using myself anymore. (17)

The other participant states that:

How would I know it's going to ruin my life? My girlfriend used drugs from time to time. I didn't let her use it. One day I was very upset. My girlfriend said, "Let me give you a cigarette (cannabis), you'll feel better." I didn't want to try it first, but I thought I wouldn't be addicted on it. I used it, but I didn't know I was using a synthetic drug called bonzai. She said it later. I liked being drunk, and then I kept using it. Then I realized that when my body started to want for drugs, I realized I was in trouble. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to quit now. (47)

Stress and weakness in coping mechanisms. Individuals who have been exposed to negative life events have a high risk of developing addiction. Such events may include parental pressure, family problems, business problems, and physical or sexual abuse. The participants stated having begun substance use because they could not cope with the stressor factors they were experiencing. One participant stated:

I was having hard time then. I had just broken up with my wife. I have a daughter, she was very young at that time. I missed her so much. We had a great crisis. I felt like I was in space. I've probably tried to cover this gap with drugs. At that time, alcohol and marijuana were enjoyment for me, I wasn't thinking about my problems when I drank, but then I started not to cope with my problems. It wasn't the right method, but it is too late for me. (37)

Loss and mourning. The loss of an important person for an individual is a difficult situation and a difficult process to cope with for everyone. Some individuals cannot manage the mourning process healthily. In this case, various psychological and social problems can be experienced such as depression, desperation, and loss of social support, as well as aggressive behaviors such as substance use and even suicide (Provini, Everett, & Pfeffer, 2000; Walters, Simoni, & Evans-Campbell, 2002). One participant stated the loss of a significant person in his life to have led him to use drug and even to suicidal behavior.

I was living with my girlfriend named G. She had a cancer diagnosis and refused any treatment. Three months later, she was hospitalized. She could not be saved despite all efforts. I fell into an emptiness after her death, I did not want to live. I tried to commit suicide. I stayed in intensive care for a week. Life became even more unbearable for me. That was the first time I used marijuana. Then it became insufficient for me. Pills (ectacy), then heroin... It still goes on. (24)

The presence of substance use in the social environment. A negative social environment is an important risk factor for substance use behaviors. The presence of substance use in one's social environment results in learning and imitating this negative behavior. A study has shown that the prevalence of substance use behaviors in individuals who have substance users in their social environment; adolescents in particular are at a higher risk for substance use than others (Altonji, Cattan, & Ware,

2016). Participants expressed the negative impact of negative social environment on substance use as follows:

My father was in prison at that time. My mother had trouble taking care of us on her own. We had no money at that time. We were left alone with my brother. There were some guys in the neighborhood, they used some drugs. In fact, everyone does in the environment where I live, it is quite normal. I was 15-16. I imitated them and began smoking (marijuana). They used to tell us not to drink, but we did. How were we to know? (30)

Being able to access substances and being curious. Being able to access substances and being curious are together an important risk factor for substance use behavior. In particular, selling medicines in pharmacies without prescriptions that have potential addictive effects and having access to these substances in an environment such as a laboratory can facilitate substance use behaviors (Can, 2015). One participant stated:

In my life everything was normal; I went to school like everyone. I was in vocational high school... I chose the plumbing and natural gas department. One day in the laboratory class, the teacher gave us materials that need to be cleaned with a thinner. While we were cleaning the materials, we joked among ourselves and started to pretend to be thinner addicts. How would we know that we're going to be like the kids we've been messing with in the streets? Under the effect of thinner, time flew. We were looking forward to the next lesson. And then we got careless and got caught, but it was too late. (49)

Positive and negative changes in their lives after beginning substance use. Participants were asked about their life experiences and about the pros and cons in their lives after they began substance use. According to the results from the content analysis themes such as pleasure, light drunkenness, and fun were found to have emerged as positive life experiences after beginning substance use. On the other hand, the participants stated that the effects they expressed as positive changes lasted for a short period of time, and then they faced many problems. Participants generally stated that they experienced family problems, disrupted family integrity, social exclusion and social isolation problems, financial losses, and psychological problems such as depression and even suicide attempts after beginning substance use. One substance user stated negative social conditions after substance abuse as follows:

I've never seen anything positive. I enjoyed it at first, but it lasted a very short period. I realized that I had lost all of my life. I lost my family and my friends slowly. I was left by my fiancée because she said she couldn't be with a drug user anymore, she was right. Who wants to be with an addict. (1)

Another participant stated starting to have academic problems after beginning substance use, then he quit school and got a job, but he also continued to have work problems. He stated:

I've never had anything positive in my life. All the balances are broken. I began to use when I was 16, then I had to drop out of school. I couldn't get into classes. Then I got a couple of jobs, but I succeeded at none of them. I couldn't go to work or give myself to work. (6)

Another participant stated:

You need money to buy drugs. How will you find money if you are not already working? I stole my mother's money, my mother was hurting, but what could she do? I tried to kill myself several times and I opened my eyes in a hospital. I've had a lot of wounds on my body, there are disgusting pimples on my face. You're forgetting everything. Look at me. (47)

Discussion

This study has found that certain problems in the family system have a negative effect on substance use behavior. Problems such as poor family support, criminal behavior of family members, substance use behavior among the family, and domestic violence are important risk factors for an individual's substance use behavior. Risk is higher especially in adolescents. In a study conducted with 571 high school students, the relationship between family dynamics and substance use behaviors was investigated. According to the results of the study, poor family dynamics were found to mediate the use of psychoactive substances and negative emotional symptoms (Trujillo, Obando, & Trujillo, 2016). According to these findings, it is clear that that micro, mezzo and macro sized studies should be conducted for families. For this reason, individual and group studies should be conducted for families or family members whose family relationships are weak in cooperation with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies and the Ministry of National Education.

According to the results from content analysis, one of risk factors that cause individuals to drugs use is the impact from peers and friends. Participants stated friends' substance use behaviors to be one of the most important reasons for their own substance use behavior. Although the power of relationships with peers is an important factor for learning and internalizing this behavior, it plays a critical role in learned negative behavior. Considering all these findings, the importance of school guidance services in preventing substance use behaviors is very critical, and the staff from school guidance services should undertake psychosocial studies with students who use substance or who are at risk of substance use.

Not only is having substance use behavior among family members but also living in a social environment where substance use behaviors are common are risk factors for learning, trying, or using substances. Considering that substance use behavior is a criminal behavior in Turkey, preparing macro social policies to prevent their sale is important. Another risk factor for substance use behavior is adolescence. During this period, the adolescent individual has to cope with many problems. An adolescent who cannot cope with stressor factors can easily lead to substance use behaviors. In recent years, substance use behavior among adolescents has increased rapidly (McCance-Katz, 2017). During this period, family problems; employment problems; physical or sexual

abuse; academic, mental, and physical problems; and many psychosocial problems cause substance use behavior. In addition, the intensive and long-term experience of these problems weakens the coping mechanisms of adolescent individuals (Alfven, Östberg, & Hjern, 2008; Armstrong & Costello, 2002; Molina & Pelham, 2003; Steinberg, Fletcher, & Darling, 1994). Studies have focused on the relationship between many stressor factors with substance use behavior in this period (Low et al., 2012). For this reason, studies should be done with adolescents on minimizing stress factors, such as stress coping strategies, anger management, and communication. Family studies are another important part of working with adolescents. For this reason, psychosocial support studies should be performed on the characteristics of adolescence and the problems adolescents experience during this period.

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