

## On the Importance of Peer Influence for Adolescent Drug Use: Commonly Neglected Considerations

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Researchers and practitioners have asserted that peer influence is the major cause of adolescent substance use. The most common evidence given in support of peer influence is the frequently observed association between substance use by adolescents and their friends when adolescents are asked to report their own and their friends' substance use.

Selection and projection are two mechanisms that radically differ from peer influence and might explain that association. Perhaps some adolescents select friends similar to them in substance use and drop (deselect) friends who become dissimilar to them in substance use. In those cases, substance use is cause and friendship is consequence, whereas the peer influence explanation posits friendship as cause and substance use as consequence. Also, behavioral studies have concluded there is a tendency for individuals to project their own behaviors onto others. If some adolescents project their substance use or nonuse onto their friends and the friends do not behave as projected, then the association between adolescents' report of their own substance use and substance use by their friends is spuriously inflated and therefore does not reflect peer influence.

In our longitudinal studies of adolescent drinking and cigarette use, we used social network methodology that, unlike earlier studies, allowed disentangling the processes of influence and selection. We found that nearly half of the association between adolescent and friend use was due to selection. We also used biochemical indicators of cigarette use that allowed, in combination with the social network methods, estimation of erroneous projection of substance use. We found that projection had a substantial impact on the association between adolescent reports of their own cigarette use and use by their friends. This paper reviews findings from our earlier studies and research by others, presents our new findings on projection, and considers related methodological and theoretical issues. The conclusion that friend influence might be a much weaker determinant of adolescent substance use than commonly assumed is considered important in the context of future research and prevention programs.



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