Sigma's 29th International Nursing Research Congress

A Qualitative Study: Undergraduate Students' Attitudes and Beliefs About Marijuana

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Purpose:

Young adults often initiate marijuana use during the college years (Suerken et al., 2014) which has resulted in marijuana being reported as the most prevalent illicit drug used on college campuses (Johnston et al., 2012). In a study of 11 U.S. college campuses, the rate of marijuana use over the past month averaged 26.2% (Pearson et al., 2017). Students reported believing medical marijuana should be legalized for physical and mental illnesses; recreational use should be legalized in adults; and marijuana use is safer than consuming alcohol (Pearson et al., 2017). To gain a more in-depth understanding of student views, the objectives of this qualitative study were to assess attitudes and beliefs about marijuana use among undergraduate students at a faith-based, Mid-western university. Fitting with social learning theory, beliefs and attitudes towards drug use are derived from a variety of sources including social norms and perceived effects (Bandura, 1986). This theoretical perspective served as a foundation for the qualitative inquiry.

Methods:

Undergraduate students were recruited through general education courses, psychology courses, and campus posters to participate. Because focus groups are an effective way to explore richer expressions of sensitive health topics, data were collected using structured, open-ended questions regarding students’ attitudes and beliefs about marijuana. Undergraduate nursing students were trained on the methodology and how to conduct focus groups. Prior studies have demonstrated that undergraduate students have successfully recruited subjects and delivered interventions with minimal oversight (Kurtz & Kessler, 2017; Travis, 2009). Four focus groups were conducted. Each session was recorded and then transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. The research team, undergraduate students and faculty, analyzed the transcripts for trends and categories. While individual student opinions were examined for important insight, group level data regarding attitudes and beliefs were targeted.

Results:

A total of 37 students participated, ranging in age from 18-36 years (M = 19.9). Each group consisted of 6-12 students. The majority of students were white (76%), female (59%), and non-Greek affiliated (70%). Nineteen percent of the students reported using marijuana within the last 30 days. Five broad categories related to students’ attitudes and beliefs were identified during analysis: media exposure, attitudes toward use, perceived societal benefits, reasons for usage, and legalization and regulation. Through these broad categories and subcategories, students detailed their beliefs and attitudes about marijuana use and current trends. Media exposure to marijuana is extensive and targeted through social media, clothing, television, and celebrities. Students believed marijuana use is popular and safe, and in particular, safer than alcohol use and binge drinking. While there are perceived broad societal effects from legalization
such as financial benefits from taxation, marijuana has medicinal benefits. These medicinal benefits include treating the side effects of disease and decreasing anxiety. As marijuana gains legalization, students believe it is important to clarify legal regulations such as driving under the influence, possession amounts, and minimum age regulations.

Conclusion:

Findings from this qualitative study are similar to what is reported in the literature. Students confirmed clear opinions about marijuana regarding its legalization and changing societal views. Students reported increased exposure in various media sources and that societal attitudes about marijuana use are becoming more relaxed. Additionally, students reported they are accepting of its use for both medicinal and recreational purposes which may impact future regulations and health care delivery.

Title:
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Keywords:
attitudes towards marijuana, college students and qualitative

References:


Abstract Summary:
Marijuana is reported as the most common illicit drug used on college campuses. Through focus group interviews, college students expressed their opinions about the safety, popularity, and legal concerns related to the medicinal and recreational use of marijuana.

Content Outline:
I. Introduction
A. Marijuana use on college campuses

B. Students’ perception of marijuana use

C. Purpose statement

II. Method

A. Setting – university setting

B. Qualitative design
   1. Focus groups
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C. Theoretical Model – social learning theory

D. Verbatim transcription

E. Analysis of transcripts

III. Results

A. 37 students
B. Five broad categories
   1. media exposure
   2. attitudes towards use
   3. perceived societal benefits
   4. reasons for usage
   5. legalization and regulation

C. Examples of student statements

IV. Conclusions

A. Students clear opinions about marijuana
B. Support for medicinal and recreational use
C. Impact on future regulations and health care

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**Professional Experience:** Dr. Kessler is Professor and Kreft Endowed Chair at Valparaiso University, USA. Her clinical area of expertise is adult health nursing, and she is certified as an Adult Health Clinical Nurse Specialist through the American Nurses Credentialing Center. She has an active consulting practice. Dr. Kessler has been active with the Indiana Division of the American Cancer Society and the Zeta Epsilon Chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International. Her research interests include cognitive appraisal and quality of life for individuals facing cancer, the health status of underserved adults, and smoking cessation among underserved pregnant women and college students. She has published book chapters and is published in a variety of journals including: Journal of Professional Nursing, Research in Nursing and Health, Nursing Leadership Forum, Oncology Nursing Forum, Seminars in Oncology Nursing, Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing, Journal of Community Health Nursing, and Journal of Nursing Education. **Author Summary:** Dr. Kessler is Professor and Kreft Endowed Chair for the Advancement of Nursing Research at Valparaiso University, USA. She is a clinical nurse specialist in adult health. She has an extensive research background and her areas of interest include cognitive appraisal and quality of life for individuals facing cancer, the health status of underserved adults, and health behaviors of college students.

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**Professional Experience:** Dr. Kurtz began teaching in the undergraduate nursing program in fall of 2003. Prior to teaching at Valpo, she taught in the undergraduate nursing program at Rush University and practiced as a Psychiatric Clinical Nurse Specialist in the hospital setting. She has worked in the area of psychiatric nursing since 1988 in many acute care facilities as well as the outpatient setting. Currently, she maintains a part-time practice providing cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia at a local outpatient psychiatric office. **Author Summary:** Dr. Kurtz maintains a part-time practice providing cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia at a local outpatient psychiatric office. An area of special interest is experiential teaching strategies. She implemented simulation experiences in the psychiatric/mental health nursing course. She is currently president of the Zeta Epsilon chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International.

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