

Social construction of racism and poverty: drug and alcohol use



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Social Construction of Racism and Poverty and how it can lead to Drugs/Alcohol abuse in Teenage Females

Going through the stressors of life for any one individual can be confusing, along with an array of many more emotions. However, when faced with the social standards that are placed on young women to be a certain way, look a certain way, act a certain way and uphold a certain image, there are several possible negative outcomes that could possibly occur. A major negative result of these social constructs may be the misuse/abuse of drugs and/or alcohol during the teenage years. This stage in a young person's life can be viewed as a major influential time, one of experimentation for them (Statistics Canada, 2016). However, there are reasons more complex than experimentation that may lead a young person to feel the need to use drugs/alcohol. This paper will speak to the social construction of race as well as poverty/class and how these factors can influence the misuse of drugs/alcohol. According to Baines (2001) "Categories such as race, class, and gender are ongoing processes of domination and subordination that permeate our everyday lives in a myriad of ways." It is no wonder that these factors in conjunction with the everyday microaggressions (Sue et al., 2009) that racialized, lower class girls face result in the abuse of negative substances.

When discussing race/racism, it is reasonable to say that race is a socially constructed issue (Yee, 2004). Race categorizes individuals according to commonalities in ancestry and focuses on the physical characteristics these individuals have such as skin colour, hair texture and certain facial characteristics (Yee, 2004). The above given definition of race, however, <https://assignbuster.com/social-construction-of-racism-and-poverty-drug-and-alcohol-use/>

does not fully cover the intricate and evolving meaning of race that has been negatively associated to ethno-racial minority communities (Yee, 2004). As we continue, the correlation between race and the use of harmful substances for young females will build on one another. When faced with the negative assumptions and biases that are born from the remarks of racism, young women can be made to feel inadequate. This places them in a box surrounded by stereotypes that can seem never ending and places a sense of hopelessness onto the individual left to wonder if these assumptions will follow them into their adulthood. In a study of 178 African American teenage girls, between the ages of 11-19 years old, that 93% reported experiencing some form of discrimination/ racial discrimination (Guthrie et al., 2002). Although the above study was largely focused on the connection between racialized females and discrimination that can lead to tobacco smoking, it can be assumed that much of this data can also be used to link the possibility of alcohol/substance use to these young women. Potential stereotypes they may face is that black women are loud, bound to be young single mothers who will live off financial aid. Being met with these negative assumptions can lead to these young women feeling inadequate.

If teenage girls feel discriminated against and as though they are treated as "less than" (Guthrie et al., 2002), like their worth is below that of their "white" counterparts, alcohol and drug use is a possibility. For them, this may seem like a way to disconnect from that sense of worthlessness, and for a time, allow them to feel a sense of belonging and connect to others who are facing the same problem. This feeling of connection and wanting to be a part of something bigger is upheld by McCreanor et al (2013), who

agrees that peer influence holds a lot of merit to a possibly vulnerable and unconfident individual. When discussing race, a lot of times, it is assumed the discussion is between African American individuals and white individuals. However, discrimination does not discriminate, therefore it is not as simple as black and white. This social construct includes but is not limited to Indigenous peoples as well. In the literature by Cheadle & Whitbeck (2011), it states that adolescents appear to begin drinking earlier and their use progresses more rapidly than the regular use of non-Indigenous youth. One can argue the rape and violence Indigenous women are faced with can contribute to this. They are left without any sense of justice. Native women have been painted with the picture of being lazy, dirty and careless, they are seen as willing and easy (Anderson, 2018). This image was made by that of the government, in order to cover up the truth and divert the blame that in reality, these women were just struggling with the cruel conditions of reserve (Anderson, 2018). Racism as well as sexism plays a role in this action, as young females are not treated fairly due to their Indigenous identity. Whitbeck (2011) re-enforces the idea that Indigenous communities grapple with crime, risk of victimization along with drug and alcohol abuse. Racism has been around for centuries, and as such, has been ignored and in fact, condoned. The hierarchical system grounded by our government has for so long, overlooked the superiors. These "superiors" are white, heterosexual males that our government has so long enforced the idea of power over their racialized opposites.

The idea that race and poverty play a role in the misuse of drugs/alcohol amongst teenage girls is not a farfetched idea. Given the pressures these

young women are faced with in their day to day lives, it is only normal for them to feel overwhelmed and under pressure. Without the right outlets or supports, it is not uncommon for them to partake in activities that can help them to forget or make them feel better. Some stressors that girls may face on the daily may be the pressure to look a certain way, such as those social media influencers they follow, or to have a feeling of belonging and the need to be popular. There are also expectations set on them to do good in school, help out around the house, cook, clean, help take care of siblings a lot of the time or even get a job at a young age to help support the family. If they have a boyfriend, the boyfriend may have an idea of what she, as his girlfriend, owes him, and the pressure to be sexually active comes in to play. Abuse and mental health are important to consider. Adolescent girls are more likely than boys to be victims of abuse and to struggle with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety which are associated with elevated rates of drinking (Brown et al., 2008).

When the stress of poverty is added to all of this, the odds are substance use increase. Wadsworth et al. (2008) confirm that the effects of poverty-related stress are extensive, can be damaging to the physical and psychological well-being of children and adolescents, and contribute to substance use. Young people who must wonder when or if their caregiver is going to be able to afford dinner that night or if they are going to be able to walk in to a warm house in the winter are faced with challenges others cannot even imagine. This particular idea makes it understandable as to why young teen girl who have poverty related stress may take part in drug/alcohol use.

Lack of financial stability risk factors include low parental education, the number of parents in the home and other influences (Wallace & Muroff, 2002). According to Guthrie et al., (2002), participants in a study involving African American teenage females, primarily lived in female single-headed families, and perceived themselves as middle class. Their social class however was suggested to be lower, as 37. 1% of these individuals have admitted to having access to some form of public assistance (Guthrie et al., 2002). Young women who come from single parent households are at greater risk to try or use substances. This may be due to lack of supervision, as mentioned by Hemovich, Lac & Crano, (2011) who state that youth from dual-parent households were least likely to use drugs and were monitored more closely than single-parent youth. But, this may also be due to the lack of income, which they may then be held accountable for contributing to. This places a lot of responsibility and pressure onto the female, which can lead them to substance use as a sense of relief to their otherwise overwhelming and hectic lifestyle.

The consequences of using these substances go further than just the immediate risks of overdose or having a bad high. For instance, teenagers who are 15 or younger are four times more likely than later-onset peers to experience future dependency problems (Hemovich, Lac & Crano, 2011). This fact is strengthened by Cheadle & Whitbeck (2011), and they also add that early use dramatically increases the risk of developing an addiction later on in life (Cheadle & Whitbeck, 2011).

When thinking about what social workers can do and how to fix the problem,

Bacchi's (2012) idea of "*What's the problem represented to be?*" (WPR)
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could hold some influence. The focus of WPR is to understand policy better than those individuals who make policy (Bacchi, 2012). It understands that people live their lives in certain ways due to the shaping impact of proposals that create an understanding of problems (Bacchi, 2012). There is an interruption to the belief that problems are fixed and uncontroversial starting points for policy development (Bacchi, 2012). Although this focuses on written policies, one can argue that this way of thinking and approach can still be used in the implementation of a program or agency where all teenage girls can feel accepted. An organization where racialized/impoverished individuals can turn to in order to gain supports when feeling overly stressed or pressured by the societal standards of today could be pivotal in decreasing substance use. Baines (2001) explores the idea that a worker can be a part of immediate and longer-term strategies for constructing social justice if they are aware of their position within the system, reproduction and culture, and share this position with others like them.

Workers are constantly on a mission to break down barriers and if they know where they stand in terms of delivering services and service supports, they can have a much greater ability to assist those who they cannot relate to in some way.

In thinking about how social workers can go about supporting these young women and possible intervention strategies, this idea of using WPR could be helpful, although that is only half the battle. For instance, although we know the problem is teenage drug use and drinking, and that

racialized/impoverished females may be at greater risk for the abuse of these substances, there needs to be unique interventions tested. There are <https://assignbuster.com/social-construction-of-racism-and-poverty-drug-and-alcohol-use/>

still gaps and barriers to work through that have already been tested when trying to decrease the risk of drug/alcohol use in teenagers with little luck. The use of public service announcements (PSA) was used in a study including 25 at risk youth (Ti et al., 2017). Its focus was to show PSA's in the past have concentrated on preventing drug use among youth by using fear-based appeals in an effort to motivate behavioral change (Ti et al., 2017). However, Ti et al. (2017) did acknowledge that fear through PSA's can foster feelings of dislike, isolation, or resentment among young people. Something interesting to note from Ti et al. (2017) is that from 2007 to 2012, \$29.8 million was budgeted for the Government's Prevention Action Plan, which included the DrugsNot4Me campaign. This campaign was a drug prevention PSA that was directed towards youth, though it was not very successful. According to Ti et al. (2017):

“ Another main issue identified by a large number of participants was that the PSAs failed to acknowledge or address the broader contexts of the primary characters' progressive drug use and addiction, including the social, structural, and environmental factors that powerfully shape young people's vulnerability to illicit drug use.” (Ti et al., 2017)

This links to Reisch's (2019) information about organizations in multicultural societies, and the difference between intentions and outcomes. Meaning, an organization or worker could have the greatest of intentions in order to assist young women in not misusing substances, but if the intervention is not targeted correctly, the outcome could be ineffective and potentially damaging. Referring to Ti et al., (2017) and the quote above, if the PSA's weren't successful, it may have been due to the fact that they did not target

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the populations correctly. For example, the programs and strategies that were created by the campaign did not match the needs of the community (Reisch, 2019), maybe not taking in to account factors such as housing issues, race or exposure to violence. Another reason for failure that workers need to bear in mind when working with young people is having a position of power over the client as apposed to working with them. Ensuring an organization does not hold a hierarchical relationship with the community, but rather a co-operative and equal one (Reisch, 2019) is imperative. This allows the young people to start building up trust in you and your work and can in fact empower them to make their own decision and build confidence. Reisch (2019) agrees that goals of empowerment and social justice are sometimes forgotten when putting together action plans, which can then result in the reverse effect of perpetuating oppression and privilege onto client (Reisch, 2019).

Something else that should be noted when speaking about developments that can be organized by workers/organizations is that social workers ultimately work for and are funded by the government. The government of Canada does not generally send out outrageous amount of money, unless they are getting a return from it or can profit from it in some way. It is crucial that frontline workers remember this as it impacts the quality of services they are able to provide, and affects the support given when they find themselves needing to speak up due to lack of services. The Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators (CCSWR), a project funded by the government, talks about the use of “ competent” social workers (Aronson & Hemingway, 2011). According to Aronson & Hemingway (2011) this

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competent worker is someone who is compliant with the current restrictions and is obedient to the procedures as they are. It is not someone who is a critical professional able to exercise judgement and question the limitations of the system (Aronson & Hemingway, 2011). The CCSWR, funded by the federal government, has made a list of practice competencies for workers, building a reduced and automatous conceptualization of social work (Aronson & Hemingway, 2011). This indeed is the hidden agenda of the government, to hire more complicit individuals who do not want to mess with the status quo. Neoliberal pressures toward smaller government and reduced support for citizen welfare, the political and economic quest to control social programs is what seems to be the guiding factor in building the CCSWR (Aronson & Hemingway, 2011). If the funding given to workers is not adequate, only given if the money is used how the government sees fit, or if there is a fear of speaking out against what new programs should be applied, the motivation and availability to put these needed programs into practice is near impossible. Social workers are always asked to think critically. They are reminded that although essentially working for the government, the goal is to be an agent of change. The only way to be an agent of change is to not be comfortable in being complicit, to not be afraid to speak up. The goal is the equity and well-being of the clients served, no matter what criteria the government sets in place to limit workers from spending more that is found “necessary”.

An important note to take away about this topic and the information gathered is that when looking up facts and data, the research was limited. The statistics are always changing, therefor the research should continue to

develop as time moves forward. What worked or didn't work when these studies were done, may or may not be relevant to a group of young women today, therefore newer strategies may need to be built. Most of the limitations found during the writing of this paper are based off a lack of current research. Especially on the usage of drugs/alcohol in teenage girls who were racialized/marginalized. This idea is strengthened by Watt (2008) as well as Wallace & Muroff (2002), who agree that more research is needed, especially when considering substance use differences for minorities vs. Whites, males and females, young people vs. adults and should consider economic status. Social work as a profession is continually evolving and changing, as clients do. Practices that were used 20 years ago, although still useful today, need to be adjusted and shifted depending on the clientele served. Parton (2000) agrees that social work is a profession based on evidence and is backed by research, it should establish which strategies are beneficial to which clients, when they should be used and why.

Some statistics that were found interesting during the production of this paper come from a poll taken in 2012 by Statistics Canada (2016) which showed that 20% of girls and 21% of boys 15-17 years of age had used marijuana within the past year. In this same study, other substances such as pain relievers, ecstasy, LSD among other drugs were most frequently reported among the girls and boys (Statistics Canada, 2016). In reference to alcohol use, it accounts for 4.6% of the global burden of disease, a third of which falls within the 15-29 years age range (McCreanor et al., 2013).

In closing, more up to date research needs to be done regarding the social construction of race and poverty and the impact they have on substance
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drug and alcohol abuse among teenage girls. It can also be beneficial to focus exclusively on these individuals and get their input when thinking about interventions/prevention strategies to put in place. This population can be vulnerable and placed in positions that can have an impact on their lives for years. If further research is not done to see how race and poverty along with intersecting risk factors make young women susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse, social work as a profession is not holding itself accountable to prevention. Along with research, further implementation and funding is needed to see what and how interventions would be beneficial to this population. Young women already have a hard time navigating through their teenage years, facing an already intimidating and hectic world, without having the harsh truths of their realities adding to their struggle. The hope would be to make young women feel powerful and confident without the use of these substances and give them the service availability of support when they are finding it hard to cope.

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