

College Students' Old Friends Versus New Friends: How Do Alcohol and Drug Use Enter the Mix?

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Alcohol consumption and drug use have been linked to many negative consequences for college students including motor vehicle accidents, academic problems, unprotected sex, and maladaptive behavior (Boyle et al., 2006; Baer et al., 1995; MacCoun, 1998). SAMHSA (2002) reports that of people 18-25, 75.4% drank alcohol and 31.9% used illicit drugs in the past year. Research on college social networks (e.g. Noel et al, 2006; Thombs et al, 2005) suggests that friendships are highly associated with students' drinking behavior. But which friendships are important? Young peoples' social networks often fluctuate during early college. Old friendships may change, and exposure to a new cohort may lead to new friendships. Understanding the dynamic interplay of substance use and friendship may assist in preventing problems associated with this behavior.

The present study examined old versus new friends' similarities in substance use and the likelihood of engaging in these behaviors with an old versus a new friend. 190 students (23% male, 89.9% Caucasian, M age = 18.6, sd = 1.9) answered an anonymous survey for Intro Psych credit. Each participant was required to bring a same gender friend, specifically not a romantic or potential romantic partner, who was also willing to participate. Upon arrival, each dyad was separated to prevent communication during survey completion. Each member of the dyad completed exactly the same set of questionnaires, including a self-report Quantity-Frequency drinking survey covering the past 90 days (QFI, adapted from Cahalan et al, 1969), self-report of drug use frequency during the past 90 days, similar questionnaires regarding their friend's drinking and drug use, and an estimate of how frequently per week in the last 30 days they drank alcohol with their friend or used drugs with their friend. All dyad members were undergraduates (89.3% freshmen or sophomores) and 95% were single. Their estimates of relationship length ranged from one week to 216 months (M = 28.7, sd = 43.4; with a correlation between S's and partners of .95, $p < .001$). Drinking days in the last 90 ranged from 0 – 70, M = 16.9, sd = 18 (68 or 18.1% were abstinent) and 32.2% had used marijuana in the last 90 days.

Partners were divided into "Old" friends (known ≥ 12 mos., $n = 85$) and "New" friends (known < 12 mos., $n = 105$). Additionally, each partner's self report of drinking frequency was subtracted from the S's self-report and then converted to an absolute scale to calculate a Frequency Discrepancy Score (FDS) for each dyad. A similar procedure yielded an Amount Discrepancy Score (ADS) and a Drug Use Discrepancy Score (DUDS).

Three 2 (Gender) x 2 (Old vs. New Friend) ANOVAs were conducted, one on each dyad's FDS, ADS and DUDS. In terms of frequency, old friend dyads were more likely to drink alike than new friend dyads ($F(1,177) = 3.9$; $p < .05$). The subject's amount of alcohol and frequency of drug use were not associated with the likelihood of drinking or drug use with new or old friends. There was no effect found for gender. Similar 2 X 2 ANOVAs were conducted using the subject's report of how often he or she drank alcohol with the partner and how often he or she used drugs with the partner. For drug use (but not alcohol use), male participants were significantly more likely to use drugs with new friends than with old friends. This finding was non-significant for female participants. Findings supported the hypothesis that college students seem to be drinking similarly to their old friends, but not necessarily selecting their new friends on the basis of drinking frequency. However, the finding with drug use and male participants suggests that new relationship might be at least influenced by some sharing of drugs. Further longitudinally-based research with a large number of college student participants may shed further light on this process.

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