



Internalization of social norms and its relevance in changing risk behavior in Slovak adolescents

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Background

Social norm theory has been extensively applied in public health research and particularly in the context of health-related behavior and behavioral change. Relatively recently, it has been suggested that extending this approach to focusing on actual internalization of norms provides an even more effective means for establishing a long-lasting change in behavior. The aim of this study was to use this extended approach and study alcohol use among adolescents in the context of social norms and internalization processes as defined within the Self-determination theory.

Materials and methods

Sample

- A representative sample of 581 early adolescents (mean age = 12.5 SD= 0.5; 49% girls) from Slovakia participated in a larger project focusing on health-related behaviors (No. APVV-15-0662 and VEGA 1/0371/20)

Measures

- Respondents completed measures addressing internal and external regulation based on the SDT and single item measuring social norms.

- **Risk behavior** alcohol use was measured on a dichotomous level (used/ not used).

Statistical analyses

- Binary logistic regression was used to explore the relationship between normative beliefs and alcohol use after controlling for the relevant variables. The data were analyzed by using regression analyses in SPSS 21.0.

Results

The results of the analyses have shown that the model was statistically significant and fairly powerful ($R^2 = 0.22$ (Cox & Snell), 0.29 (Nagelkerke). Model $\chi^2(1) = 117.5, p < 0.001$). After controlling for socio-demographic variables, descriptive norms (95%CI=1.14-1.95) and external regulation (95%CI=1.04-1.17) were positively associated with alcohol use. Association of normative beliefs related to partner's and friend's social influence as well as personal norm was negative. However, this was not observed for internalized regulation which was not significantly associated with alcohol use.

Table 1 Logistic regression model with alcohol use as a dependent variable

	B	SE	95% C.I. for Odds ratio		
			Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Internal regulation	-.022	.019	.942	.978	1.016
External regulation	.095	.029	1.039	1.100	1.165
Personal norm	-.477	.191	.427	.621	.903
Social norm (partner)	-1.681	.336	.096	.186	.360
Social norm (friend)	-.284	.132	.582	.753	.975
Injunctive norm	-.157	.128	.665	.855	1.099
Descriptive norm	.399	.137	1.140	1.490	1.948
Constant	8.038			3097.486	

Note: $R^2 = .218$ (Cox & Snell), .293 (Nagelkerke). Model $\chi^2(12) = 535.392, p < .01$.

Conclusion

The findings obtained by this study provide evidence for the relevance of the social norm approach. They show that the level of internalization may be an important factor to consider when using this approach in interventions aimed at changing risk behavior such as alcohol use. In addition to focusing on changing norms, attention to the level of internalization and particularly external regulation would be advisable.

Main message: While social norms are important determinants of health behavior, focusing on the internalization of these norms may improve the persistence of desired behavioral change in interventions.

References

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