RESEARCH BRIEF
THE ACCEPTABILITY OF NON-ABSTINENT TREATMENT GOALS
AMONG CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES

For tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use, most clinical social workers (51%–84%) rated non-abstinence as an acceptable goal regardless of finality of the outcome goal for clients with a moderate SUD, but smaller proportions rated non-abstinence acceptable for clients with severe SUD regardless of drug type or finality of the goal.

KEY FINDINGS

- For tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use, most clinical social workers (51%–84%) rated non-abstinence as an acceptable goal regardless of finality of the outcome goal for clients with a moderate SUD.
- Ratings of non-abstinence for cocaine, hallucinogens, opioids, and methamphetamine are always the lowest ratings compared to tobacco and cannabis and almost always rated as unacceptable.
- Higher ratings of acceptability of non-abstinence were significantly associated with younger age.
- Higher ratings of acceptability of non-abstinence were significantly associated with lower drug use stigma.
- Regarding whether illegality of drugs impacts beliefs about non-abstinence, 46% of utterances reflected that there was little/no influence. 34% reflected drug scheduling criteria need re-evaluation because they are outdated and lack supportive scientific evidence.

About this Study

In the United States (US), approximately 21 million people are diagnosed with a substance use disorder (SUD); however, only 11% of individuals obtain treatment. One reason is individuals who struggle with SUD are often unable or unwilling to abstain from substance use, which is the prescribed goal in many SUD treatment facilities. However, research on acceptability of non-abstinence goals has focused primarily on addiction counselors and lacks representation of clinical social workers. Also, although evidence supports non-abstinence as a viable alternative to abstinence-based treatment, many social workers find it unacceptable. This could be due to influence of national drug policies on social work (SW) practice.

This study employed a mixed-methods study design examining perceptions of non-abstinence treatment goals among clinical social workers in the US who specialize in SUD treatment. We examined whether acceptability of non-abstinence varied as a function of a client’s severity of SUD diagnosis (severe vs. moderate), finality of outcome goal (intermediate vs. final), and type of substance (e.g., alcohol, cannabis) among clinical social workers in the US. A series of one-way repeated measure ANOVAs, Pearson Correlations, and independent samples t-tests were used in the study for quantitative data analysis. The study included two open-ended questions to explore whether illegality of drugs impacts beliefs about non-abstinence, and whether participants viewed the discrepancy between SW values (self-determination) and national drug policy interferes with practice. A content analysis was used to develop and assign participants’ responses to a list of themes. In total, we surveyed a geographically representative sample of 309 clinical social workers (Mean age=48.9[SD=14.4]; Female=76%; Caucasian=87%; Mean years practicing=14.6).
ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Yitong Xin is a PhD candidate at The Ohio State University College of Social Work. Her overarching research areas focus on four themes: substance use, harm reduction, trauma, and resilience. Specifically, her research focuses on understanding the complex interactions among risk factor of trauma and protective factor of resilience that influence substance misuse behaviors when developing harm-reduction approaches (e.g., psychedelic-assisted; non-abstinence). Yitong is a Licensed Social Worker and EMDR-trained therapist in the state of Ohio. Megan España is a PhD candidate at The Ohio State University College of Social Work. Her research interests include migration, human rights, qualitative methods, and global perspectives. Dr. Alan K. Davis is a Clinical Psychologist and Assistant Professor of Social Work and Psychiatry at The Ohio State University and Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Davis’s clinical experience includes working with people diagnosed with trauma-based psychological problems. His research interests focus on helping those suffering with substance use and mental health problems and developing ways to conceptualize substance use and mental health problems through a strengths-based approach. He has published 70+ scientific articles and book chapters and presented research at dozens of national and international scientific conferences.

Contact information: Alan K. Davis, davis.5996@osu.edu