



Situating alcohol use and delinquency within developmental and societal context: The case of Korean youth

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Abstract

In this study involving self-report questionnaire data from 955 tenth-grade students in three locations within Korea, we address the meanings of alcohol use and delinquency for Korean youth. Findings (a) supported a facilitative role for alcohol, but not delinquency, with respect to perceived peer social competence; (b) indicated negative associations of both alcohol use and delinquency with parental relations, valuing academic achievement, and collectivistic values, and positive associations with friends' risk behaviours; (c) showed no relationship of these behaviours with self-esteem, coping, parental permissiveness or individualistic values; and (d) revealed that perceived benefits of alcohol use and delinquency include not only social facilitation but also exploration and assertion of independence, suggesting a potential connection, as in Western societies, between risk taking, and identity exploration.

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Introduction

In this study, we explore the meanings of alcohol use and delinquency for Korean adolescents. The Korean context is of interest because, despite societal values and practices that have

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traditionally been viewed as protective for adolescent risk taking, there have been marked increases in Korean adolescent risk behaviours in recent years. In what follows, we first highlight some of the key findings from Western studies regarding the role of risk taking in adolescent development. Then, following a brief description of Korean society, we discuss the specific goals and research questions for the present study. Throughout, we use the terms risk taking and risk behaviours interchangeably to refer to volitional actions on the part of adolescents that have potential negative health or developmental outcomes.

Risk taking and development

As pointed out many years ago by Baumrind (1987, 1991), if we are to gain an understanding of adolescent risk behaviours, we must consider the developmental context and functions of these behaviours. While the use of alcohol and other drugs may lead to negative consequences, for many adolescents, experimentation does not signal problematic development. It may in fact be indicative of adaptive identity exploration and play a role in facilitating peer relations (Maggs, 1997; Shedler & Block, 1990; Silbereisen & Noack, 1988; Silbereisen & Reitzle, 1991).

In her developmental analysis of adolescent risk taking, Lightfoot (1997) emphasizes the role of risk taking in self-construction and interpersonal relationships. The teens in her study talk of risk taking as pushing the limits, exploring new territory, and in the process, learning about themselves in these new situations. There is a sense of accomplishment that comes from gaining control in unpredictable situations, and “getting away with” something disapproved by adults. They talk of risk as creating excitement and also as serving to reduce tension. Taking risks with peers can provide shared memories, and serve to enhance a group identity, cohesion, and feelings of closeness among group members.

However, the picture is complex: the consequences of risk taking vary depending upon many factors including the nature of the behaviour and the type of developmental competencies or relationships being considered. For example, Maggs and Hurrelmann (1998), in a longitudinal study of German adolescents (spanning grades 7–10), found support for their predictions that substance use, in contrast to delinquency, would be positively related prospectively to several indicators of peer relationships. They reasoned that delinquency does not play a facilitative role in peer relations to the same extent as does substance use because delinquency is less normative, cannot be viewed as healthy exploration, and is viewed more negatively by society.

Among a sample of seventh- and eighth-grade students, Allen, Weissberg, and Hawkins (1989) found that conforming to adult norms regarding risk behaviours related negatively to peer sociometric ratings and self-reported social competence, and positively to teacher ratings of class behaviour, GPA, and self-reported cognitive competence. Similarly, Maggs, Almeida, and Galambos (1995) reported, in their third-wave, 14-year-old sample, positive associations between risk behaviours and peer involvement and perceived peer acceptance, but negative associations between risk behaviours and self-image.

Bell, Forthun, and Sun (2000) studied risk behaviours (alcohol and marijuana, problematic or non-problematic use) in relation to parental attachment and several adolescent competencies, predicting different patterns of associations depending upon type of substance and extent of use. Supporting expectations, peer competency was positively related to both alcohol (women only)

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