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Delinquency as a mediator of the relation between negative affectivity and adolescent alcohol use disorder

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Abstract

This investigation examined mediators of the longitudinal relation between negative affectivity and the development of problematic drinking behavior in adolescent boys and girls. In the present study, 499 early adolescents completed inventories of negative affectivity, attitudes toward delinquency, personal delinquency, and affiliation with delinquent peers. Positive attitudes toward delinquency emerged as the most consistent mediator and strongly predicted drinking frequency in various situations. Compared with personal delinquency, both attitudes toward delinquency and peer delinquency were superior predictors of affect-related drinking. Our results also demonstrated that positive attitudes toward delinquency mediated the relation between negative affectivity and later development of an alcohol use disorder. These findings suggest that a proneness to unpleasant affect impacts adolescent drinking by heightening risk for general rejection of normative behavior, rather than by increasing drinking as a means of managing affect. The importance and implications of testing delinquency variables together in the same model are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have linked the personality variable of negative affectivity, defined as the predisposition to aversive emotional states, to greater amounts of drug and alcohol use in adolescents (e.g. [Colder & Chassin, 1993](#); [Krueger, Caspi, Moffitt, White, & Stouthamer, 1996](#); [Labouvie, Pandina, White, & Johnson,](#)

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1990; Shoal & Giancola, 2003). However, efforts to apply traditional negative affect regulation models (Conger, 1956) to adolescent drinking have yielded mixed results (see Shoal & Giancola, 2003 for review). A more powerful and empirically validated predictor of substance use is delinquent behavior. Delinquency has manifested a strong association with substance use across a variety of studies (Brook, Whiteman, Finch, & Cohen, 1996; Giancola & Parker, 2001; Kingery, Pruitt, & Hurley, 1992). As such, some researchers argue that delinquency, peer delinquency (Chassin, Pillow, Curran, Molina, & Barrera, 1993), or simply positive attitudes toward delinquency (Kaplan, 1980) may be more important proximal predictors of adolescent alcohol use, compared with the potentially more distal effects such as negative affectivity.

Kaplan (1980) proposed a specific model of adolescent substance use in which individuals who repeatedly experience negative affect in a given social environment will begin to experience substantial frustration with the parameters of that environment. One response to this frustration might be to reject culturally prescribed values and increasingly embrace more “deviant” attitudes and behaviors in the effort to increase positive reinforcement. Kaplan emphasized that the development of positive attitudes toward deviancy occurs primarily in individuals who lack the instrumental resources (i.e. coping ability) to manage affect in a constructive way within the normative environment. In the final step of the Kaplan’s basic model, positive attitudes toward deviance lead to substance use as the individual drinks alcohol or uses other drugs as an expression of a more general deviancy.

Models from the criminology literature suggest that attitudes toward delinquency and association with delinquent peers are intimately linked as proximal precursors of adolescent substance use. Differential association theory (Akers, 1977; Sutherland, 1939) contends that delinquent behavior is learned from close peer groups. According to this theory, the developing individual’s exposure to attitudes and motives that promote non-normative behavior are weighed against exposure to factors encouraging more lawful behavior. Moreover, Cairns and Cairns (1994) found that friendships among adolescents are most likely to form between individuals similar on the dimensions of social class, popularity, aggression, and achievement. Once individuals who are already similar in personality and attitudes group together, a type of contagious reciprocity may take effect whereby similarities in behaviors become even more pronounced. As this would predict, one adolescent being in the presence of other adolescents who drink has been shown to escalate both the drinking behavior of the individual and that of the group (Curran, Stice, & Chassin, 1997).

As these arguments demonstrate, the effects of peer association and attitudes toward delinquency upon adolescent drinking are multifaceted. Most social scientists believe that the behavioral similarities of group members are a result of a combination between socialization and group selection processes (Reed & Rountree, 1997). What these conceptualizations have in common with Kaplan’s (1980) theory is that attitudes favorable toward delinquency and association with delinquent peers are highly influential in determining the extent to which the adolescent becomes involved in alcohol use. As such, attitudes toward delinquency and association with delinquent peers merit examination in models of affect-related adolescent drinking.

1.1. Empirical evidence: personal delinquency and attitudes toward delinquency as mediators

Underage alcohol use represents a form of delinquency. As such, tests of negative affect regulation models should address the possibility that drinking is simply one facet of an overall syndrome of non-normative or problematic behaviors. Caspi et al. (1997) demonstrated that adolescents high in negative affectivity are significantly more likely than controls to engage in a broad array of high-risk behaviors including violent offending, sexual risk-taking, dangerous driving, and problematic alcohol use. They found these behaviors to covary significantly, indicating that adolescents high in negative affectivity are

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