



Mediational relations of substance use risk profiles, alcohol-related outcomes, and drinking motives among young adolescents in the Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

Aim: To examine the mediation by drinking motives of the association between personality traits (negative thinking, anxiety sensitivity, impulsivity, and sensation seeking) and alcohol frequency, binge drinking, and alcohol-related problems using a sample of students ($n = 3053$) aged between 13 and 15, who reported lifetime use of alcohol.

Method: Structural equation modeling was used to examine the relationship between personality traits and alcohol-related outcomes. The Model Indirect approach was used to examine the hypothesized mediation by drinking motives of the association between personality traits and alcohol-related outcomes.

Results: In this study among young adolescents, coping motives, social motives and enhancement motives played a prominent mediating role between personality and the alcohol outcomes. Multi-group analyses revealed that the role of drinking motives in the relation between personality and alcohol outcomes were largely similar between the sexes, though there were some differences found for binge drinking. More specifically, for young males, enhancement motives seems to play a more prominent mediation role between personality and binge drinking, while for young females, coping motives play a more mediating role between personality and binge drinking. Few mediation associations were found for conformity motives, and no relationships were found between anxiety sensitivity and drinking motives.

Discussion: Already in early adolescence, personality traits are found to be associated with drinking motives, which in turn are related to alcohol use. This study provides indications that it is important to intervene in early adolescence with interventions focusing on personality traits in combination with drinking motives.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol use among adolescents is a persistent problem in the Netherlands, especially binge drinking. Of the Dutch 12- to 16-year-olds who drink alcohol, 67% also engage in binge drinking (Van Dorsselaer et al., 2010), defined as consuming five or more alcoholic drinks on one occasion in the previous month. In addition, youngsters in the Netherlands start drinking at an early age: 46% of 12-year-old males report having consumed alcohol; for females, this is 36% (Van Dorsselaer et al., 2010). Since early and heavy drinking has severe negative health consequences (e.g., Andersen et al.,

2003; Tapert et al., 2002), it is important to get more insight into the correlates and underlying mechanism of the development of alcohol use in underage drinkers.

Previous studies have convincingly shown that substance use is associated with personality. Personality dimensions are an expression of biologically based systems that regulate the different sensitivities of individuals to negative and positive affective stimuli (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1978). Personality dispositions involving neurotic tendencies or deficits in behavioral inhibition have been found to predict alcohol use and misuse (Barret et al., 1998; Comeau et al., 2001; Conrod et al., 2006; Woicik et al., 2009). One instrument that measures personality dimensions specific to substance use is the Substance Use Risk Profile Scale (SURPS; Woicik et al., 2009). This newly developed instrument distinguishes four distinct and independent personality traits (i.e., negative thinking, anxiety sensitivity, impulsivity, and sensation seeking) that have subsequently

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been found to be strongly related to adolescents' quantity and frequency of drinking, binge drinking, and severity of alcohol-related problems (Conrod et al., 2006; Sher et al., 2000; Woicik et al., 2009).

To provide more insight into the underlying mechanism of the development of alcohol use and alcohol-related problems, it is important to consider not only distant predictors such as personality traits, but also more proximal predictors, like drinking motives (Kuntsche et al., 2006a; Magid et al., 2007). Several studies have suggested that drinking motives play a pivotal role in young people's drinking and the development of alcohol-related problems (e.g., Comeau et al., 2001; Cooper, 1994; Kuntsche et al., 2006b, 2008b; Magid et al., 2007). Various studies have demonstrated that social motives (drinking to celebrate with others) are related to frequent but moderate drinking, enhancement motives (drinking to have fun and to get drunk) and coping (drinking to alleviate problems and worries) are related to heavy drinking, and conformity motives (drinking to be liked and to fit in with a peer group) are related to low levels of drinking, but together with coping motives they are associated with a higher level of alcohol-related problems (Cooper, 1994; Kuntsche et al., 2006a,b, 2008b).

A few studies have examined the mediating role of drinking motives with respect to the relationship between personality and patterns of alcohol use (e.g., Cooper et al., 1995; Goldstein and Flett, 2009; Kuntsche et al., 2008a; Littlefield et al., 2010; Magid et al., 2007). However, these studies focus mainly on young adults (i.e., college students; 18–24 years) rather than adolescents. Early adolescents in particular have been found to be vulnerable to risky personality predispositions (e.g., Carver et al., 2009; Malmberg et al., 2010). Risk behavior, besides having genetic and environmental factors, is thought to be due to a combination of lack of logical reasoning and psychosocial factors. Whereas logical-reasoning abilities seem relatively developed around age 15 years, psychosocial abilities relating to decision making and moderate risk taking are thought to continue to develop into young adulthood (Steinberg et al., 2008).

The SURPS captures specific personality dimensions concerning emotion regulation tendencies (anxiety sensitivity and negative thinking) and deficits in behavioral inhibition (impulsiveness and sensation seeking) and may therefore help to explain individual receptivity to substance use during the period of adolescence. Moreover, elucidating the interplay within young adolescent drinking behavior between relevant and distinct risky personality traits and the different possible motives to drink, may provide for the construction of more developmentally appropriate interventions targeting juvenile drinking.

Almost all research on the mediating role of drinking motives in the association between personality and alcohol use has come from North America, with the two exceptions of Kuntsche et al. (2008a) and Urbán et al. (2008). It is imperative to study these relations in the Netherlands as alcohol prevalence is higher in Europe in general and in the Netherlands in particular (Van Dorsselaer et al., 2010). Hence, in the Netherlands, the age of onset is low compared to other European countries (Van Dorsselaer et al., 2010), and the legal age for drinking is much lower than that in, for example, North America (16 vs. 21, respectively). Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine more closely the drinking behavior in underage drinkers with relatively easy access, and few barriers, to alcohol use.

On the basis of a review of young people's drinking motives, Kuntsche et al. (2006a) distinguished two patterns of use. Adolescents who were characterized as extravert, impulsive, aggressive, and sensation seekers with low inhibitory control drank for enhancement motives, used alcohol excessively, including binge drinking, and were more likely to be male. Adolescents who were neurotic and fearful of anxiety-related sensations drank for coping motives, experienced more alcohol-related problems, and tended to be female. Consistent with these findings, Magid et al. (2007)

found that these two pathways differed between male and female adolescents: the path from enhancement motives to alcohol use was stronger for males and the path from coping to alcohol-related problems was stronger for females.

Using a sample of 13- to 15-year-olds in the Netherlands, the primary aim of this study was to determine whether previous findings of relations between personality traits and drinking motives extend from young adults to young adolescents. It is not self-evident that drinking motives, and their associations with alcohol use and personality, in early adolescents are the same as in late adolescents or young adults. On the basis of previous studies on personality and drinking motives (Comeau et al., 2001; Cooper et al., 1995; Goldstein and Flett, 2009; Kuntsche et al., 2008a; Littlefield et al., 2010; Magid et al., 2007), we expected (1) two patterns: the effect of extraversion and the novelty seeking traits *sensation seeking* and *impulsivity* on alcohol use was expected to be mediated by enhancement and social motives, and the effect of the neuroticism-related traits *anxiety sensitivity* and *negative thinking* on alcohol use and alcohol-related problems was expected to be mediated by coping motives; (2) that these patterns would be sex specific: we expected the pathway from extraversion traits to enhancement and social motives to alcohol outcomes to be more pronounced in male young adolescents, and the pathway from neuroticism-related traits to coping motives to alcohol-related outcomes to be more specific for female adolescents. Research has shown that there are differences between males and females (e.g., Kuntsche et al., 2006a; Magid et al., 2007; Sher et al., 2000).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Cross-sectional data for this study were obtained from a larger effectiveness study, called Preventure. Preventure is a selective prevention program for binge drinking among young adolescents (Conrod et al., 2006). A total of 100 schools were selected randomly from a list of all public secondary schools in the Netherlands ($N=405$). These schools fulfilled the following inclusion criteria: (1) at least 600 students, (2) <25% of students from migrant populations, and (3) not offering special education. A total of 15 schools were willing to participate. Those schools were representative in terms of level of education and geographical spread. A screening survey (at baseline) among all students attending grades 8 and 9 was carried out at the participating schools. The data were collected in September–October, 2010. The study design was approved by the Medical Ethical Commission for Mental Health. The Preventure study method is described in a study protocol (Lammers et al., 2011).

A total of 5057 students participated in the first baseline wave of the Preventure study. Because drinking motives were not relevant for non-drinkers (39.6%), the sample was restricted to those students who reported lifetime use of alcohol. This resulted in a final analytical sample of 3053 students aged between 13 and 15 ($M=14.0$, $SD=0.95$), of which 1615 were males (52.9%) and 2627 (86.0%) were of Dutch ethnic origin. Of all participants, 47.6% pursued a combination of pre-university education and senior general secondary education, 27.7% junior general secondary education, and 24.6% preparatory vocational training.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Personality traits. The Substance Use Risk Profile Scale (SURPS) (Conrod and Woicik, 2002; Woicik et al., 2009) distinguishes four personality profiles. Negative Thinking (NT: 7 items) refers to hopelessness, which might lead to depressive symptoms. The Anxiety Sensitivity dimension (AS: 5 items) measures fear of bodily sensations. The Sensation Seeking subscale (SS: 6 items) measures the tendency to seek out thrilling experiences. The tendency to act without thinking is measured by the Impulsivity subscale (IMP: 5 items). Each profile is assessed using five to seven items that could be answered on a 4-point scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*. Sum scores of the personality profiles were used in the analyses, which is usual in this type of studies (e.g., Malmberg et al., 2010; Woicik et al., 2009).

Studies in both adolescent and adult samples in several countries, including the Netherlands, have shown that this scale has good internal reliability, good convergent and discriminant validity, and adequate test–retest reliability (Krank et al., 2011; Malmberg et al., 2010; Wiers et al., 2010; Woicik et al., 2009). Two of the 23 items were removed because of low factor loadings. All four subscales demonstrated a reasonably good internal consistency in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.82$ for NT, 0.68 for AS, 0.76 for IMP, and 0.63 for SS). These reliability estimates are satisfactory for short scales (Loewenthal, 1996).

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