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Original article

Drinking Motives Mediate Cultural Differences but Not Gender Differences in Adolescent Alcohol Use



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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To test whether differences in alcohol use between boys and girls and between northern and southern/central Europe are mediated by social, enhancement, coping, and conformity motives.

Methods: Cross-sectional school-based surveys were conducted among 33,813 alcohol-using 11- to 19-year-olds from northern Europe (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, and Wales) and southern/central Europe (Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia, and Switzerland).

Results: Particularly in late adolescence and early adulthood, boys drank more frequently and were more often drunk than girls. Instead of mediation, gender-specific motive paths were found; 14- to 16-year-old girls drank more because of higher levels of coping motives and lower levels of conformity motives, whereas 14- to 19-year-old boys drank more because of higher levels of social and enhancement motives. Geographical analyses confirmed that adolescents from southern/central European countries drank more frequently, but those from northern Europe reported being drunk more often. The strong indirect effects demonstrate that some of the cultural differences in drinking are because of higher levels of social, enhancement, and coping motives in northern than in southern/central Europe.

Conclusions: The results from the largest drinking motive study conducted to date suggest that gender-specific prevention should take differences in the motivational pathways toward (heavy) drinking into account, that is, positive reinforcement seems to be more important for boys and

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

To reduce underage drinking, the results from the largest drinking motive study conducted to date suggest targeting gender differences in the motivational pathways toward (heavy) drinking (positive reinforcement for boys and negative reinforcement for girls) and social and enhancement motives together with drinking circumstances in northern Europe.

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negative reinforcement for girls. Preventive action targeting social and enhancement motives and taking drinking circumstances into account could contribute to tackling underage drinking in northern Europe.

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Despite declines in recent decades [1,2], gender differences remain one of the most reliable determinants of alcohol consumption; males drink and are drunk more frequently than females [3–5]. Given differences in the ratio of body water to body weight and alcohol metabolism, women are more susceptible to alcohol effects than men [5]. Interestingly, although gender differences in risky drinking are almost nonexistent in early adolescence, they become more and more pronounced later on [6,7]. For example, across 38 countries, repeated drunkenness prevalence increases with age, from 2% among 11-year-olds to 9% and 32% among 13- and 15-year-olds, respectively, and the gender gap also increases with age [8].

Although countries across Europe have become more similar in terms of drunkenness prevalence [2], drinking cultures differ between northern Europe, where excessive drinking on particular occasions is more socially acceptable, and southern European wine-producing countries, where the predominant drinking pattern is frequent consumption of moderate amounts of alcohol often accompanying meals [3,9,10]. For example, in countries such as Denmark, Wales, and Estonia, the prevalence of repeated drunkenness among 15-year-olds exceeded 45% compared with 20% or lower in countries such as Portugal and Italy [8]. Differences in alcohol policy and traditional drinking patterns in a culture might account for cross-national differences in drunkenness among young people [11,12].

However, the basic question emerges as to whether gender and drinking culture differences directly account for variations in drinking and drunkenness frequencies or whether the relationships reported previously are mediated by another variable, such as drinking motives. Drinking motives constitute a final pathway toward alcohol use [13,14], that is, the gateway through which more distal factors are mediated such as alcohol expectancies [15], genetic factors [16], and personality characteristics [17,18], to name but a few. Drinking motives can be classified by the kind of reinforcement individuals like to obtain (positive vs. negative) in relation to either the psychoactive effects of alcohol (internal) or instrumental social effects (external). This results in four distinct categories [19]: enhancement (internal positive, e.g., drinking to have fun); coping (internal negative, e.g., drinking to forget problems); social (external positive, e.g., drinking to be sociable); and conformity (external negative, e.g., drinking to fit in with a group).

Previous research has shown that social motives are related to frequent drinking, whereas enhancement and coping motives are related to frequent drunkenness [14,20]. Boys tend to report social, enhancement, and conformity motives more frequently, and coping motives less frequently, compared with girls [20,21]. These gender differences are more marked among older adolescents [22]. For example, Cooper [19] found no gender differences at the age of 13 and 14 years but a stronger increase in social and enhancement motives among boys in subsequent years. Unfortunately, the limited available evidence originates mostly from North America or from individual European countries [23].

This study is based on a large cross-national survey of 13 European countries covering the broad age range from early to late adolescence. In a previous article [23], we confirmed the four-dimensional factor structure and the hierarchy of mean levels of drinking motives and their links to alcohol use across countries. In this article, we focus on gender differences. We expect higher levels of social, enhancement, and conformity motives and lower levels of coping motives among boys than among girls [20,21]. This should be particularly the case among older adolescents [19]. Subsequently, we test whether the four drinking motive dimensions mediate the link between gender and alcohol use. We expect that the higher levels of social and enhancement motives among boys account for the higher frequencies of drinking and drunkenness. An exception to this mediation is anticipated among younger adolescents because of the lack of gender difference in alcohol use previously reported [6,7]. Furthermore, this study investigates whether adolescents from countries in northern Europe differ in their drinking motivations from those in southern/central European countries, testing whether the link between drinking culture (northern vs. southern/central Europe) and alcohol use is mediated by drinking motives.

Methods

Study design

Most data used in this study are from the “Health Behaviour in School-aged Children” (HBSC.org) study [8]. Of the 43 countries and regions participating in this World Health Organization (Europe) collaborative project, 11 included the “Drinking Motive Questionnaire Revised Short Form” (DMQ-R SF [20]) in their 2009/10 survey. The Hungarian and Italian data were collected independently from Health Behaviour in School-aged Children but also using a random cluster-sampling procedure with school classes serving as primary sampling unit. All data were collected between autumn 2008 and spring 2010. In each country, nationally representative surveys were conducted; exceptions where regionally representative samples were collected were Belgium (Flanders region), Hungary (Budapest region), and Italy (Veneto region) [23].

Teachers or members of the research team distributed anonymous self-report questionnaires in the classroom. Students were instructed that participation was completely voluntary. In each country, the study was approved by the appropriate university or governmental ethics review board. The average response rate was 71% with 60% or higher for all countries except Denmark (46%) and Belgium (29%) (mainly because of an elevated refusal rate on school level and not because of a low participation rate at an individual level [8]).

Sample

Participants with missing values for gender or age (about 1.1% in total, ranging from 0% in Belgium, Portugal, and Scotland to

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