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Future orientation climate in the school class: Relations to adolescent delinquency, heavy alcohol use, and internalizing problems

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ABSTRACT

It is well known, based on previous research, that adolescents' thoughts and feelings about their future are related to the risk of delinquency, alcohol use as well as health. However, other well-known facts are that adolescents' actions are substantially shaped in interaction with peers and that, during adolescence, individuals spend a considerable amount of the day at school, in interaction with classmates. Despite this, there is an almost complete lack of studies exploring to what extent the school climate, as measured by thoughts and feelings about the future, can influence individual adolescents. The aim of the current study is to investigate whether the future orientation (FO) climate, measured at the school class level, is related to delinquency, alcohol use and internalizing problems at the individual level, among a sample of Swedish students 14–15 years of age. The data used come from the Swedish part of the Youth in Europe (YES!) study, which is part of the larger project Children of Immigrants - Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU). In the present paper, we use data from the first wave, collected among 8th grade students in 2010/11 (n = 4119–4364). The method used was multilevel modeling (linear probability models (LPM) and linear regression analysis). The results showed that, in school classes where a high proportion of students had a positive future orientation, the risk of heavy alcohol use at the individual level was lower, also after adjusting for individual FO and for individual- and class-level socioeconomic conditions. A similar, but not statistically significant, tendency was found for delinquency. In addition, having a high proportion of students with a positive FO in a school class was associated with fewer internalizing problems, also after controlling for individual FO and socioeconomic conditions at the individual and school class level. We conclude that the surrounding school class, in terms of its general future orientation climate, may play a role for individual outcomes in the form of problem behaviors and mental health.

1. Introduction

It is well known, based on previous research, that adolescents' thoughts and feelings about their future are related to the risk of delinquency (Clinkinbeard, 2014), heavy alcohol and drug use (McKay, Percy, & Cole, 2011) and subjective ill-being (Zhang, Howell, & Stolarski, 2013). And although the majority of existing studies are cross-sectional, which means that the direction of causality can be questioned, in recent years findings from a few longitudinal studies have also pointed in the expected direction (Brezina, Tekin, & Topalli, 2009; Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2011; Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013; Piquero, 2014; Chua, Milfont, & Jose, 2015). However, as we know, adolescents' actions are substantially shaped in their interaction with peers (Lansford et al., 2009), and during adolescence individuals spend a considerable amount of the day at school, in interaction with classmates (Smith, Boutte, Zigler, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004). Despite this, there is an almost complete lack of studies exploring to what extent the school climate, as measured by classmates' thoughts and feelings about the future, can influence individual adolescents. In fact, we only know of one such previous study, conducted on American data (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013).

The aim of the current study is to investigate whether future orientation climate, measured on the school class level, is related to delinquency, heavy alcohol use and internalizing problems among Swedish adolescents 14–15 years of age. Although committing criminal offenses during adolescence is not uncommon, it is a significant risk factor for criminality as an adult (Bäckman, Estrada, Nilsson, & Shannon, 2014). Based on previous research, we also know that regular alcohol use in the teenage years predicts alcohol abuse among adults (De Wit, Adlaf, Offord, & Ogborn, 2000; Bonomo, Bowes, Coffey, Carlin, & Patton, 2004). Internalizing problems such as stomachache, headache, worry and anxiety are common among adolescents, particularly among girls (Torsheim et al., 2006; MacLean et al., 2013). Earlier studies have shown that self-reported somatic complaints in adolescence or in

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young adulthood predict mental ill health later in life (Bohman et al., 2012; Shanahan et al., 2015). Thus, these outcomes are important both to adolescents here and now and from a life-course perspective. Below, the concept of future orientation will be introduced.

2. Future orientation – previous studies and theoretical underpinnings

There are many ways to approach individuals' thoughts and feelings about the future, and the same approaches are sometimes conceptualized differently in different studies. However, a useful umbrella term is future orientation, FO, originally introduced by Trommsdorff (1983) and Nurmi (1991). FO can be defined as "…an individual's thoughts, plans, motivations, hopes and feelings about his or her future" (Stoddard et al., 2011, p. 239). Therefore, FO can be said to include a *cognitive*, as well as a *motivational* and an *affective* component. The cognitive component concerns, e.g., judgment of internal vs. external causes of future events, i.e. questions may ask to what extent one believes oneself to be the primary agent in one's future, or whether one expect powers external to oneself, such as God, fate or luck, to be in control. The cognitive component can also include questions about the extension of one's time perspective into the future. The motivational component includes, e.g., perceived values in future domains, i.e. questions about how important one believes higher education, a well-paid job and/or having children to be for a good personal future. The affective component finally, is perhaps the most intuitive and probably the most common in studies on FO, and primarily concerns one's feelings in terms of optimism/pessimism regarding the future (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013).

Although people orient themselves toward the future during their entire life span, it is only natural that the future dimension is particularly crucial during adolescence and young adulthood, when decisions about education, occupation and other key life aspects are typically made (Nurmi, 1991; Adams & Marshall, 1996; Chua et al., 2015). Several studies have shown associations between different aspects of FO and outcomes such as delinquency, heavy alcohol and drug use, and subjective well-being (e.g., Clinkinbeard, 2014; McKay et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2013), and a few of these studies are based on longitudinal data (Brezina et al., 2009; Stoddard et al., 2011; Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013; Piquero, 2014; Chua et al., 2015). Within criminology, a commonly adopted theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between low FO and problem behavior is Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime (GTC), which is sometimes applied in combination with elements from rational choice theory (e.g. Piquero, 2014). According to GTC, criminal behavior is a result of low self-control (Clinkinbeard, 2014). The idea underlying rational choice theory is that a pessimistic view of the future makes it only rational to affirm impulsiveness and a here-and-now orientation in one's actions. The rational choice approach is also closely linked to the perspective suggested by Sykes and Matza (1957), according to which low expectations of the future could serve to neutralize the effect of delinquent behavior in the eyes of the actor him-/herself. Alternatively, the relationship between low FO and delinquency has been analyzed within the framework of classic strain theory (Farnworth & Leiber, 1989; Alm & Estrada, 2016), where low FO is treated as an indicator of a self-defined lack of means, which in combination with a desire to achieve culturally defined goals is recognized as strain.

Many problem behaviors, e.g., heavy alcohol use and drug use, can also be considered health-endangering behaviors (e.g. Jessor, 2014; Olsson & Fritzell, 2015), and studies have shown that FO also predicts health care behavior (Jones, DeMore, Cohen, O'Connell, & Jones, 2008) as well as health/well-being/ill-being (Lindström Johnson, Blum, & Cheng, 2014; Patton et al., 2001). Concerning mental health, Patton et al. (2001) found a protective effect of optimism about the future on depressive symptoms, and Chua et al. (2015) found positive, directional associations between optimism about the future and outcomes in terms of vitality, sleep and happiness with weight. As regards mechanisms that account for the relationships, Chua et al. (2015) found that the relationships were mediated by coping strategies such as resilience, social support and problem solving. When it comes to health care behaviors, as pointed out by Lindström Johnson et al. (2014) (whose line of reasoning is similar to the above discussion on FO in relation to criminal offending), it is only natural that a pessimistic view of the future promotes a here-and-now orientation and a focus on instant reward rather than investment in actions in the present to avoid negative future consequences. Exercise and safe (as opposed to unprotected) sex are examples of investments that may be less likely to be practiced by adolescents with a more pessimistic FO (Lindström Johnson et al., 2014).

The variation in FO (and its different components) with respect to individual-level factors such as gender and the socioeconomic status (SES) of the family of origin has been of some interest in previous studies. Starting with gender, as touched upon by Nurmi (1991), it is reasonable to expect that the higher the degree of gender equality in society, the more similar the life chances of women and men will be, and the smaller the gender differences in FO can be expected to be. In a study on Swedish data, Alm (2014) found that girls looked somewhat more brightly on their future than boys did. The tendency for girls to do better in school was put forward as one possible explanation.

Concerning social class, previous studies have typically found individuals from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds to view the future more optimistically than those from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamm, Schmidt, & Trommsdorff, 1976; Alm, 2014). As suggested by Alm (2011), differences in locus of control (Rotter, 1954) could be part of the explanation for this: More privileged class positions are linked to better possibilities for control, directly in relation to work, but also indirectly in relation to, e.g., higher income. Individuals from more privileged socioeconomic positions may therefore see what happens in their lives as a result of their own decisions and actions, rather than as being the result of luck or faith or the actions of other people. Generally, however, we may expect the same rule to apply to SES as applies to gender, i.e. that the greater the socioeconomic differences in a given society, the greater the differences in FO in relation to social class.

3. Criminal behavior, heavy drinking and internalizing problems among adolescents

Considered from a life course perspective, it is well know that criminal behavior peaks during the mid-adolescent years. Already from around 16–17 years of age, the risk of being registered for crime decreases, and hence, for a majority of young offenders, committing crime is a transitory phenomenon (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Estrada, 2013). The pattern differs somewhat by type of offense, however, the general rule being that the more serious the type of offense, the larger the proportion of adult offenders (Estrada, 2013). The most common offenses among adolescents are petty theft and vandalism. However, it is also well known that there are substantial gender differences with respect to crime, both concerning the amount and type of crime committed (Estrada, 2013). Whereas boys are more involved in, e.g., vandalism and unlawful driving, girls more often commit petty theft and fraud (Estrada, 2013). The trend in Sweden during recent years toward somewhat smaller gender differences in criminality among adolescents is mainly an effect of men committing less crime (Estrada, 2013). Concerning SES, young individuals from less privileged backgrounds commit more crimes than do those from more privileged homes (Estrada, 2013). Even though the majority of those who commit crime during adolescence stop offending during the transition to adulthood, there are also those who do not, and criminal behavior as a teenager is a known risk factor for adult criminality (e.g., Bäckman et al., 2014.)

In a similar vein, concerning alcohol use, although experimental drinking is not uncommon among adolescents, several studies have found that regular alcohol use in the teenage years predicts alcohol