



Unplanned reaction or something else? The role of subjective cultures in hazardous and harmful drinking



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ABSTRACT

This study compares the impact of levels of impulsivity and subjective cultures through which subjects interpret their experience of the social environment on the probability of hazardous and harmful alcohol use. A sample of 501 participants from Southern Italy completed a series of questionnaires in order to detect their subjective cultures and levels of impulsiveness (attentional, motor and non-planning). Moreover, alcohol consumption, drinking behavior, alcohol-related problems and adverse reactions during the past year were assessed. A sub-group of hazardous and harmful drinkers ($n = 106$; 21%) was identified and a healthy control group ($n = 127$; 25%) was selected. Members of the hazardous and harmful group view the social environment as a significantly more unreliable place, and also scored higher on motor impulsiveness and lower on non-planning impulsiveness. Discussion considers theoretical and clinical implications of the results.

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1. Introduction

Most social science explanations emphasize individual motivations for human behavior. Accordingly, maladaptive pattern of behavior is conceptualized in terms of a faulty, erratic psychological mechanism, due to which the individual is no longer able to operate “realistically”, according to the principles of normal, healthy, goal-oriented behavior. Psychopathology is considered in terms of functional impairment or disability (Bergner, 1997). An epistemology of sickness and disease is recognizable also in the earlier theorization on hazardous and harmful alcohol use (Fingarette, 1988). More than 70 risk factors have been associated with substance use (Swadi, 1999) and the identification of the individual determinants (i.e., subjective norms, irrational belief, poor impulse control, biochemical and genetic factors) has been the main focus of the most of the psychological literature.

On the other hand, in the past two decades, there has been a growing interest in the role of social and cultural factors in affecting drinking behavior (Heath, 1995). There are several bodies of evidence and a number of systematic reviews on the influences of

family (Hayes et al., 2004), peer (Leung et al., 2014) and environment-related factors (Wagenaar et al., 2010) in the initiation and use of alcohol. Ecological models have been proposed to provide comprehensive frameworks for understanding the multiple and interacting determinants of the problem patterns of alcohol consumption (Sallis et al., 2008; World Health Organization, 2014).

This paper is a contribution to this line of thought. We argue that the personal and socio-cultural meanings (Valsiner, 2007) in terms of which actors interpret individual and contextual characteristics may play a major role in affecting maladaptive behavioral patterns, that place individuals at risk for adverse health events, as in hazardous alcohol use, or that result in physical or psychological harm, and serious social consequences, as in harmful alcohol use (Saunders et al., 1993). Cross-cultural, ethnographic, anthropological studies, as well as research in the field of cultural psychopathology, give evidence in support of the idea that “context” (interpersonal environment, social norms, socio-economic variables, cultural factors) influences health trajectories over the life course (Kroenke, 2008), defines sources of distress and impairment (Cox et al., 2011) and different protective/risk factors (Bloomfield et al., 2006). This cultural standpoint does not overlook the fact that, the propensity for substance use may be rooted, in part, in biological factors and emotional or mood disorders; rather, it underlines that the psychological value (i.e., the meaning) and the effects of individual elements on people's adaptation should be interpreted according to the culture the subject is part of.

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Within these general premises, firstly, we will examine the role of impulsivity in hazardous and harmful alcohol use, a risk factor cogently presented in the literature, in the light of the cultural dimensions that seem to effect the way impulsivity is expressed. Then, we will argue that the subjective cultures (Triandis, 1972; Venuleo, Salvatore and Mossi, 2014) through which subjects interpret their experience of the social environment play a major role in increasing/decreasing the probability of hazardous and harmful alcohol use. Finally, an empirical study will be presented where the role of impulsivity and subjective cultures in differentiating Italian hazardous and harmful drinkers and non-drinkers was examined.

2. Cultural variations of impulsive behaviors

Historically, impulsivity is the most frequently cited risk factor for maladaptive behaviors (Anestis et al., 2007), such as hazardous and harmful alcohol use. Despite the varied definitions of impulsivity (see Dawe and Loxton, 2004), widely recognized as a multi-dimensional construct, authors converge in the general idea that impulsiveness or some specific facets of it, makes individuals more prone to engage in approach behavior without considering the consequences.

Although empirical evidence has been found with higher levels of impulsivity among hazardous and harmful drinkers (Lawrence et al., 2009; Rubio et al., 2008), others have failed to support this link (Papachristou et al., 2012). It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive analysis of the factors which might explain the discordant results at a theoretical and methodological level (for a review, see Dick et al., 2010). We cite evidence here only to illustrate a key point. The works reviewed above share the assumption that the link between alcohol and impulsivity works is invariant, independent of socio-cultural and personal cultural meaning. Yet, one has to recognize that impulsivity may be expressed through very different behaviors in everyday life (talking on the phone while crossing the road, risky driving, risky sex, gambling...), corresponding to different levels of harm and social adaption (Gullo and Dawe, 2008; Schulenberg and Maggs, 2002). It is reasonable to assume that people who are high on impulsivity are, remain, or become hazardous drinkers (rather than hazardous gamblers, drivers and so on) when their impulsivity interacts with a social and cultural environment that allows their drinking to begin and to maintain. This argument is supported by the evidence that, although impulsivity as a trait is universally recognizable, hazardous and harmful drinking and other impulsive behaviors have a different prevalence in different historical periods and in different societies (Rehm et al., 2003). Variation in the meaning that different impulsive behavior acquires from one culture to another may play a role in these different rates. In certain cultures, drinking (as well as driving fast, smoking marijuana and other risky behaviors) is deplored as irrational and irresponsible, while among other cultures the same behavior can be approved and encouraged (Sznitman et al., 2013).

In addition, there is a body of research that highlights how the effect of interpersonal and social influence may also differ from one culture to another. It is recognized, for instance, that collectivistic cultures emphasize values such as conformity, obedience, and in-group harmony. These, in turn, encourage people to adjust their behavior to the group more than individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001). Individualism and collectivism were found to affect a variety of risky behaviors, like hazardous alcohol use, illicit drug use, unsafe sexual behavior, and impaired driving, whose rates are higher in nations with more individualistic cultural orientations, and lower in collectivistic cultures (Schwartz et al., 2011).

Other studies have focused on the importance of culture

conflict, acculturative stress identification, and parent-youth differential acculturation in modifying psychosocial vulnerability for alcohol and drug abuse (Cox et al., 2011; De la Rosa, 2002; Martinez, 2006). On the whole, this line of research provides support to the idea that the probability of risky behavior, like hazardous and harmful drinking, may be stronger for some people, expressing a certain position and attitude towards the role demand made on people by their social and cultural environment, than for others.

Yet, cultural characteristics (e.g., individualism and collectivism) are not global constructs that invariantly characterize members. Variation in cultural influences may be equally great within the same society boundaries (Cox et al., 2011). Thus, we argue that incorporating culture for the understanding of hazardous and harmful alcohol use furthers the acknowledgment of the cultural differences among groups characterized by different ethnicity, race and nationality and entails the recognition of the intra-variability of the culture.

3. Subjective cultures and people's adaptation

In accordance with a semiotic, cultural standpoint (Olds, 2000; Shweder and Sullivan, 1990; Salvatore and Venuleo, 2013), our work focuses on the impact that the *subjective cultures* used by subjects to interpret their social environment have on hazardous and harmful alcohol use. The term subjective culture can be found originally in Triandis (1972, 2002), and includes ideas about how to make the elements of material culture, how to live properly, and how to behave in relation to objects and people. However, whereas for the author the subjective culture is a *society's* "characteristic way of perceiving its social environment" (Triandis, 1972, p. viii, 3), we recognize that within the same society many subjective cultures may be expressed (Valsiner, 2012). Furthermore, whereas Triandis makes beliefs, norms, values, attitudes, rules and tasks elements of subjective culture, we regard these elements as the by-products of a system of meaning grounding beliefs, norms, values, rules, and so on (see Venuleo et al., 2014b).

Meaning has to be conceived as the by-product of a field dynamics (sensemaking), where individuals, the situated system of activity and culture (Valsiner, 2012) recursively interact with each other (Linell, 2009; Salvatore and Venuleo, 2013). On one hand, culture provides the semiotic resources grounding the way of perceiving and experiencing the social world, and therefore constrains the virtually infinite ways in which people can interpret their shared experience. On the other hand, human subjects take an active part in the semiotic cultural process in which they are embedded.

Based on a joint semiotic and psychodynamic perspective (Salvatore and Venuleo, 2008, 2009), in the attempt to define the relationship between shared socio-cultural forms of thinking and acting (what we are referring to as culture) and the variability of the ways such forms are expressed by different individuals and groups (Cohen, 2009), it was proposed to interpret culture as the interweaving of generalized meanings encompassing the whole experience (Salvatore and Venuleo, 2013). Believing that life is a "question of luck", or rather "of effort and pain" is an example of generalized meaning, which does not concern a specific aspect, but encompasses the experience as a whole. Any generalized meaning can be conceived as a polarity of an oppositional dimension, called a *dimension of sense* – e.g. pleasant versus unpleasant; trustworthy versus untrustworthy; familiar versus unfamiliar (Mossi and Salvatore, 2011; Venuleo and Guacci, 2014). Subjective culture can be regarded as a particular plotting of basic positions on those dimensions of sense (for instance, a combination of the position 'trustworthiness' on the 'trustworthiness–untrustworthiness' dimension of sense and the position 'dependence' on the

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