



Short Communication

Adult social roles and alcohol use among American Indians



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HIGHLIGHTS

- National longitudinal studies of American Indian (AI) substance use are lacking.
- AI alcohol use was linked to family, work, and school roles during young adulthood.
- Alcohol use decreased when AI respondents became parents.
- Alcohol use increased when AI respondents transitioned into full-time employment.
- AIs who attended college drank less than those who did not attend college.

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ABSTRACT

American Indians are disproportionately burdened by alcohol-related problems. Yet, research exploring predictors of alcohol use among American Indians has been limited by cross-sectional designs and reservation-based samples. Guided by a life course developmental perspective, the current study used a subsample of American Indians ($n = 927$) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to explore alcohol use (current drinking, usual number of drinks, and binge drinking) among this population. We examined whether adult social roles (i.e., cohabitation, marriage, parenthood, college enrollment, and full-time work) were linked to the rise and fall of alcohol use. Multi-level models demonstrated that adult social roles were linked to alcohol use at the within- and between-person levels. Becoming a parent was linked to a lower likelihood of being a current drinker, fewer alcoholic drinks, and less frequent binge drinking. Transitioning to full-time work was associated with a higher likelihood of being a current drinker and more frequent binge drinking. Results point to the importance of exploring within-group trajectories of alcohol use and highlight the protective and risky nature of adult social roles among American Indians.

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1. Introduction

Research demonstrates that American Indians (AIs) experience a disproportionate share of alcohol-related problems. AI adolescents have the highest prevalence of DSM-IV substance use disorders (Wu, Woody, Yang, Pan, & Blazer, 2011) and AI adults are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to experience alcohol-related injuries (Keyes, Liu, & Cerda, 2011). Furthermore, substance use disorders among AIs escalate during adolescence and young adulthood (Whitbeck et al., 2014), emphasizing the importance of understanding factors that may shape changes in alcohol consumption during this period.

A useful model for understanding changes in AI alcohol consumption is the life course perspective. This perspective points to the myriad of life transitions (e.g., higher education, marriage, and parenthood) clustered during early adulthood that may shape alcohol use. Although the transition to adult social roles has been linked to alcohol use (Bachman,

Wadsworth, O'Malley, Johnston, & Schulenberg, 1997; Staff, Greene, Maggs, & Schoon, 2014; Staff et al., 2010) associations vary by race (Akins, Lanfear, Cline, & Mosher, 2013; Paschall, Bersamin, & Flewelling, 2005), illustrating the importance of examining the impact of adult social roles on changes in alcohol use among AIs. Furthermore, although AIs are a culturally diverse group, they have a shared traumatic history which can cause stress or grief (Walters, Simoni, & Evans-Campbell, 2002) with implications for alcohol consumption. Thus, it is important to explore within-group predictors of alcohol use among this population.

Prior studies suggest that alcohol use among AIs is linked to social roles. Studies have found that married AIs are more likely to stop using alcohol (Stone, Whitbeck, Chen, Johnson, & Olson, 2006) or be in remission from alcohol dependence (Gilder, Lau, Corey, & Ehlers, 2008) than those who are never-married or divorced. However, some studies have found no association between AI marriage and alcohol use (Akins et al., 2013) and others have shown associations only at the bivariate level (Ward & Ridolfo, 2011). Parenthood may also be protective. For instance, Quintero (2000) examined problem drinking among Navajo men and found that parenthood was frequently cited as a primary catalyst for

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reducing alcohol consumption. Other adult statuses may also influence substance use among AIs. One recent study found that the association of education and employment with substance use differed for AIs and Whites: Among AIs, education and employment were both associated with a lower likelihood of “bender drinking” (Akins et al., 2013).

These studies provide preliminary evidence about the association between adult social roles and alcohol use among AIs, while also revealing important gaps. For instance, most of these studies used cross-sectional designs or focused on community-based reservation samples, despite the fact that only about 22% of AIs live on reservations (Norris, Vines, & Hoeffel, 2012). The current study addresses these gaps in the literature by examining whether transitions into adult social roles (i.e., cohabitation, marriage, parenthood, full-time work, and enrollment in higher education) are associated with changes in alcohol use among AIs included in a nationally representative sample. We utilize a multi-level modeling strategy to disentangle how social roles and substance use are associated at the within- and between-person level. By design, the within-person estimates control for stable individual differences between people (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), thus reducing concerns related to selection.

2. Methods

2.1. Data and sample

We utilized the restricted-use National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data (Harris, 2009), a nationally representative sample of adolescents (in grades 7–12 at Wave 1) who were initially surveyed in 1994/1995 and re-interviewed in 1996 (W2), 2001–2002 (W3), and 2007–2008 (W4). Data for this study came primarily from the in-home survey, in which information about substance use was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. Our sample was comprised of individuals who self-identified as AI or Alaskan native, either alone or in combination with another racial/ethnic group. We used the respondent's racial self-identification from Wave 3, supplementing racial self-identification from Wave 1 when Wave 3 data were missing. We limited the sample to respondents with a valid sampling weight ($n = 934$). Individuals missing information on parental education or substance use ($n = 7$) were omitted, yielding a final sample of 927 respondents. Models exploring usual drinks and binge drinking focused on individuals that ever consumed alcohol in their lifetime ($n = 833$). Table 1 presents descriptive information about the sample.

2.2. Measures

Unless otherwise noted, variables were time varying and assessed at all waves.

2.2.1. Dependent variables

2.2.1.1. Alcohol use. Current drinking was a dichotomous variable that indicated whether the respondent drank alcohol in the past year, usual drinks were the number of drinks that the respondent consumed when he/she drank alcohol (top coded at 26), and binge drinking frequency indicated how frequently the respondent drank 5+ alcoholic drinks in one episode in the past year (ranging from 0 [Never] to 6 [Everyday or almost everyday]).

2.2.2. Independent variables

2.2.2.1. Family roles. Respondents who reported living with a spouse were coded as married, those living with a partner were cohabiting, and those living with a son or daughter were parents. This approach was selected because prior research suggests that these family roles are most salient to individuals residing with family members (Staff et al., 2010).

Table 1
Descriptives for the sample ($N = 927$).

| | Percent | SE |
|------------------------------------|---------|-------|
| Demographic characteristics | | |
| Female | 0.460 | 0.022 |
| Two biological or adoptive Parents | 0.601 | 0.032 |
| Urbanicity | | |
| Urban | 0.368 | 0.066 |
| Suburban | 0.441 | 0.068 |
| Rural | 0.192 | 0.068 |
| Parent education | | |
| Less than high school | 0.238 | 0.028 |
| High school degree | 0.535 | 0.028 |
| College degree | 0.227 | 0.024 |
| Adult roles | | |
| Ever married | 0.379 | 0.029 |
| Ever cohabited | 0.284 | 0.023 |
| Ever parents | 0.450 | 0.021 |
| Ever college | 0.268 | 0.027 |
| Ever full-time work | 0.714 | 0.024 |
| Alcohol use (means) ^a | | |
| Current drinker | 0.602 | 0.018 |
| Usual number of drinks | 3.176 | 0.198 |
| Binge drinking | 1.044 | 0.057 |

Source: National Study of Adolescent Health.

Note: Results are weighted to account for the complex survey design.

^a Alcohol variables are based on person-means (i.e., each person's average across all waves).

2.2.2.2. School and work roles. Full-time employment was captured with a dichotomous variable that indicated whether the individual worked 35 or more hours weekly. A dichotomous variable assessed whether the respondent was attending higher education, including vocational school, college, or university.

2.2.2.3. Time-invariant controls. Analyses control for age, gender, parental education, family structure, and urbanicity.

2.3. Analytical strategy

To account for the complex survey design and the nested data, multi-level models with rescaled sampling weights and robust standard errors were computed. Binomial, Poisson, and Gaussian distributions were used to model current drinking, usual drinks, and binge drinking, respectively. To distinguish within- from between-person effects (Hoffman & Stawski, 2009), the Level 1 equation included time-varying indicators of whether the individual was *currently* married, cohabiting, parenting, engaged in full-time work, or participating in higher education at the time of the survey. Level 2 included a time-invariant indicator of whether the individual *ever* occupied the adult social role across all four waves.

3. Results

Results demonstrated that adult social roles were linked to alcohol use among AIs at the within- and between-person levels. In interpreting these models, it is important to note that between-person associations indicate whether average alcohol use differs for people *who* ever occupied a particular social role compared to those *who* never occupied that role. In contrast, within-person associations indicate the extent to which individuals have different alcohol use *when* they occupy a social role compared to when they do not.

As can be seen in Table 2, individuals who ever cohabited (across all waves) were more likely to be current drinkers than those who did not cohabit during the study period. At the within-person level, parenthood was associated with a lower likelihood of being a current drinker. Specifically, the odds of being a current drinker were about 60% lower when individuals resided with their children than when they did not.

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