



## Do adolescent delinquency and problem drinking share psychosocial risk factors? A literature review



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ We found shared risk factors for delinquency and problem drinking.
- ▶ Risk factors include peers, family, school, impulsivity and sensation seeking.
- ▶ Risk factors encompassed by psychosocial control theory and social learning theory
- ▶ Parsimonious framework for problem behaviours discussed

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the prevalence and damaging effects of adolescent problem drinking, relative to delinquency, far less research has focused on drinking using an integrated theoretical approach. The aim of the current research was to review existing literature on psychosocial risk factors for delinquency and problem drinking, and explore whether integrating elements of social learning theory with an established psychosocial control theory of delinquency could explain adolescent problem drinking. We reviewed 71 studies published post-1990 with particular focus on articles that empirically researched risk factors for adolescent problem drinking and delinquency in separate and concurrent studies and meta-analytic reviews. We found shared risk factors for adolescent delinquency and problem drinking that are encompassed by an extension of psychosocial control theory. The potential of an extended psychosocial control theory providing a parsimonious theoretical approach to explaining delinquency, problem drinking and other adolescent problem behaviours, along with suggestions for future investigations, is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the prevalence and damaging effects of adolescent problem drinking, relative to delinquency, it has received far less attention using an integrated theoretical approach (Ennett et al., 2008; Petraitis, Flay, & Miller, 1995). One of the more dominant approaches to explaining adolescent problem behaviour, Akers's (1977) social learning theory, suggests that problem drinking, like other deviant behaviours, is shaped by social processes. Yet, few attempts have been made to understand the psychological aspects that may contribute to this phenomenon (Baker, 2010; Costello, Anderson, & Stein, 2006; Ennett et al., 2008). This has been a substantial omission within the literature, particularly as there are well-established psychosocial theories of delinquent behaviour with considerable explanatory value (Lanier & Henry, 1998). Given that delinquency and problem drinking are two prevalent types of adolescent problem behaviour, they are likely to share classes of aetiological causes (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), warranting further research in this area.

Unfortunately, research that has investigated adolescent problem drinking and delinquency has generally examined these variables separately (e.g., Buist, 2010; Crosnoe, 2006; Montgomery, Thompson, & Barczyk, 2011). Of those that have analysed these behaviours concurrently, relatively few researchers have attempted to classify the underlying psychosocial risk factors common to both (e.g., Kenny & Schreiner, 2009; Putniņš, 2006). Meta-analytical studies that have comprehensively reviewed and organised psychosocial risk factors for adolescent delinquency and problem drinking have been limited. As demonstrated by the following literature review, meta-analytical articles summarising psychosocial causes were found only for delinquency and were few in number (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001; Leschield, Chiodo, Nowicki, & Rodger, 2008). From this perspective, the scope of the current literature review builds upon previous literature in an attempt to gain a theoretical understanding of adolescent delinquency and problem drinking.

In meta-analytical studies of delinquency, recurrent risk factors for delinquency were identified as regulatory agents, that is, elements of social or psychological control (Cottle et al., 2001; Leschield et al., 2008). An integrated theoretical framework that encompasses sociological and psychological control factors of delinquency is Mak's (1990) psychosocial control theory. Its synthesis with earlier social models of problem behaviours, such as social learning theory (Akers, 1977), may provide a comprehensive theoretical account of adolescent delinquency and problem drinking. If collective psychosocial control factors for both behaviours are identified, an extended version of psychosocial control theory may provide a parsimonious framework to organise adolescent delinquency and problem drinking, and may also facilitate understanding of problem behaviours, and assist detection and early intervention efforts.

### 1.1. A common theoretical framework of adolescent delinquency and problem drinking?

Problem behaviour theory (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), an overarching theory of deviance, encompasses a social-psychological framework of common causes to account for adolescent involvement in a range of multiple problematic behaviours. Variables derived from individual, social, and environmental systems are thought to serve as instigations for

involvement in unconventional problematic behaviours. Finding collective risk factors for two types of problem behaviours across these dimensions would provide support for the assumption of common causes within problem behaviour theory.

Social learning theory (Akers, 1977), a dominant sociological perspective of deviant behaviour, argues that unconventional actions are the result of group influence, observation, and modelling of salient role models (Ennett et al., 2008; Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). Research has shown that adolescents who are exposed to delinquent or alcohol-using peers or parents are more likely to engage in these behaviours (Haynie, 2002; May & Jarjoura, 2006), thus providing some empirical validation (Akers, 2009). Social learning theory provides a valuable explanation of adolescent peer influence, a variable overlooked in Mak's (1990) psychosocial control theory. Peer influence may be a particularly important variable for adolescent drinking styles, which have been shown to include heavy alcohol consumption in predominantly social situations (Coker & Borders, 2001). From this perspective, the integration of elements of social learning theory with Mak's (1990) psychosocial control theory is likely to provide a more inclusive account of adolescent involvement in delinquent and problem drinking behaviours. However, social learning theory does not account for the psychological aspects involved in problem behaviours, unlike Mak's (1990) psychosocial control theory, which considers both sociological and psychological risk factors.

#### 1.1.1. Psychosocial control theory of delinquency

Building on Hirschi's (1969) social control theory, and consistent with Jessor and Jessor's (1977) assumption that risk factors emerge from multiple domains, Mak (1990) developed psychosocial control theory, an integrated approach to explaining adolescent delinquency.

**1.1.1.1. Family factors.** Mak (1990) argued that adolescents with strong attachments to family are less likely to engage in delinquent activity due to fear of disrupting this relationship. This is consistent with research which has found that adolescents with weakened attachments to family were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours (Cottle et al., 2001; Hoeve, Dubas, Gerris, van der Laan, & Smeenk, 2011; Leschield et al., 2008).

**1.1.1.2. School factors.** Those who are attached to school, or have educational or occupational aspirations, avoid delinquent behaviour as it may jeopardise future career options (Mak, 1990). This is consistent with research finding that poor school attitudes or school exclusion is related to higher levels of delinquency (Li et al., 2011; McCrystal, Higgins, & Percy, 2006).

**1.1.1.3. Individual factors.** Parallel to Jessor and Jessor's (1977) assumption that risk factors for adolescent problem behaviour emerge from various domains, Mak (1990) expanded on Hirschi's (1969) original theory and introduced psychological control variables of impulsiveness and emotional empathy. Mak (1990) argued that those who have heightened levels of impulsivity and lower levels of emotional empathy are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours due to the inability to foresee the consequences of their actions and failure to fully appreciate the disapproval of others, respectively.

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