



“I cannot stand the boredom.” Binge drinking expectancies in adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The main aim of this study is to improve our knowledge on binge drinking behavior in adolescents. In particular, we tested a model of predictors of binge drinking focusing on boredom proneness; we also examined the predictive and mediating role of drinking expectancies on binge drinking. **Methods:** A questionnaire designed to assess current drinking behavior, such as binge drinking, drinking expectancies and boredom proneness, was administered to 721 Italian adolescents (61% females) aged between 13 and 19 years ($M = 15.98, SD = 1.61$). **Results:** Structural equation modeling confirmed the evidence on drinking expectancies as predicted by boredom proneness and as predictive of adolescents' binge drinking. Interestingly, disinhibition and relief from pain seem to play a more important mediating role between boredom and alcohol outcome. Conversely, no mediation was found for interpersonal and social confidence expectancies on binge drinking. **Conclusions:** In general, the results suggest that preventative interventions on alcohol misuse should focus on personality traits and underlying drinking expectancies.

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1. Introduction

Several studies have underlined that alcohol misuse is responsible for about 4.0% of the global burden of disease (e.g. Room, Babor, & Rehm, 2005). The impact of alcohol on global health is well known (e.g. Franco, 2015). In particular, the prevalence of drinking among adolescents causes serious issues in terms of the consequences for young people, as well as for families and society as a whole (Bellis et al., 2010; Oei & Morawska, 2004). Excessive alcohol use in adolescence has been shown to be associated with various injuries and health problems such as morbidity, mortality, injuries, suicide attempts, unwanted pregnancies, academic failure, and violence (Hingson, Heeren, Levenson, Jamanka, & Voas, 2002; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005; Perkins, 2002). Adolescents may be considered as “naive drinkers” (Bellis et al., 2010) as they are less capable of coping with intoxication than adults, they are likely to consume large amounts in a small time (binge drinking), and might also drink alcohol in situations that may expose them to other potential risks. Binge drinking is a very common behavior in this stage of life. Although the term “binge drinking” is widely used in contemporary society, there is no consensus definition and it has been used to describe rather different drinking patterns (Herring, Berridge, & Thom, 2008). Alternative terms to describe this risk-behavior include heavy episodic drinking, risky single-

occasion drinking, heavy sessional drinking and heavy drinking generally speaking (Berridge, Thom, & Herring, 2007). Consequently, the term binge drinking engenders some confusion, as it is often used as a synonym of drunkenness, making cross-cultural comparison difficult (Beccaria, Petrilli, & Rolando, 2015). In addition, there is no consensus as to what level of intake constitutes binge drinking (Herring et al., 2008). In general, binge drinking is used to describe a single drinking session leading to intoxication, often measured as having consumed more than X number of drinks on one occasion (Gmel, Rehm, & Kuntsche, 2003). In our study, according with Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, and Castillo (1994), binge drinking was defined as consuming five drinks in a row in the previous two weeks (later refined to five drinks for men and four for women). Wechsler and Austin (1998) defended the use of the term arguing that the definition of four/five drinks in a row represents the threshold for alcohol-related social problems. The same definition has been used also in European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) studies on alcohol use (ESPAD, 2003) and in many other surveys (Oei & Morawska, 2004; Syre, Martino-McAllister, & Vanada, 1997; Wechsler & Nelson, 2001). Binge drinking is often associated with aggressive behavior, unsafe sex, motor accidents and various psychological problems (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995) as well as with physical or cognitive impairment, interpersonal problems, and poor academic achievement (Wechsler et al., 1994).

Scholars have shown that adolescent alcohol misuse is a quite significant problem in Italy as well (e.g. D'Alessio, Baiocco, & Laghi, 2006; DiGrande, Perrier, Lauro, & Contu, 2000; Gallimberti et al., 2011). In

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general, studies have shown that young Italians drink less alcohol than their northern European counterparts (e.g. Ireland) but more as compared with adolescents in southern and eastern European countries (e.g. Greece and Romania) (Beccaria & Prina, 2010; Kuntsche, Rehm, & Gmel, 2004; Laghi, Baiocco, Liga, Lonigro, & Baumgartner, 2014). Italy is also a peculiar country where research's findings show a significant discrepancy between self-reported episodes of binge drinking and drunkenness (Beccaria et al., 2015; Hibell et al., 2012). According to ESPAD, binge drinking involves 35% of Italian adolescents (aged 15–16), a percentage slightly below the European average, but it is much higher on drunkenness frequency, which is 13% (Hibell et al., 2012). The discrepancy between these data has been ascribed to how drunkenness (meant as intoxication) is defined by teenagers in the “Mediterranean culture” and to the extent to which it is disvalued (Room, 2010). As Beccaria et al. (2015), southern European teenagers consider “drunk” in a more undesirable and deviant manner than teenagers elsewhere in Europe, and they have a greater inhibition about heavy drinking compared to their Northern European peers who have higher expectancies of disinhibition and may act accordingly. Petrilli, Beccaria, Prina, and Rolando (2014) found that Italian adolescents' images about drinking are still in line with Mediterranean tradition, as concerns the importance assigned to social drinking and the stigma instead attached to intoxication. According to Järvinen and Room (2007), Italian youngsters still seem belong to a “non-intoxication culture” (see Allamani, Beccaria, & Voller, 2010). At the same time, there has been growing awareness and concern about some changes in their alcohol drinking style and about the increased prevalence of binge drinking among young Italians as exemplified by those studies that show that binge drinking is very widespread between Italian adolescents, who do not represent marginal groups but ordinary consumers (e.g. Gallimberti et al., 2011). Italian drinking culture combines traditional and modern patterns of drinking with more globalized drinking patterns (Beccaria & Sande, 2003; Passini, 2013; Scafato, 2010). This is confirmed by growing alcohol consumption outside meals among youths aged 14–17 between 1998 and 2006 (see Beccaria & Prina, 2010): from 12.6% to 20.6% in general; from 9.7% to 16.8% for girls; from 15.2% to 20.2% for boys. For these cultural changes in alcohol drinking patterns the night-time economy (Measham & Brain, 2005) has certainly played an important role. In the past decade, in Italy too there has been a restyling of the “entertainment” where alcoholic beverages have taken a pivotal role: for instance, many new products and new methods of consume (suffice to think of the spread of “shots” among the young) have emerged (Beccaria et al., 2015). “Northern drinking habits” have spread to Italy so that adolescents today show a growing consumption of beer and spirits, a growing alcohol use at the weekends and an increased search for alcohol-related risk behaviors- (Room, 2010). In order to combat the growing problem of binge drinking and alcohol-related mortality, the Italian Government has recently adopted many strategies, including zero tolerance for drivers and stricter controls outside the discos (Laghi, Baiocco, Lonigro, Capacchione, & Baumgartner, 2012).

As regards gender differences, both international (e.g., Wilsnack, Wilsnack, Kristjanson, Vogeltanz-Holm, & Gmel, 2009) and Italian studies (e.g. Gallimberti et al., 2011; Laghi et al., 2012) have shown that binge drinking and heavy drinking are widespread especially among adolescent males. Boys are more likely to consume alcohol than girls (e.g., Wilsnack, Vogeltanz, Wilsnack, & Harris, 2000), and male drinkers consume larger quantities of alcohol than females (e.g., Balabanova & McKee, 1999). In almost all the studies on gender differences, boys were more likely to present binge drinking behaviors (e.g., Kuntsche et al., 2004).

As far as the age of onset is concerned, many studies have shown that the early onset of alcohol use is closely related to alcohol problems (e.g. Guttmannova et al., 2011); for instance scholars have reported a relationship between early age of onset and risk for later alcohol dependence (Grant & Dawson, 1997). Furthermore, scholars have shown

that boys tend to start alcohol use at an earlier age than girls (e.g. Alvanzo et al., 2011; Buu et al., 2014).

As far as the expectancies for drinking are concerned, studies (e.g., Oei & Morawska, 2004) showed that both adolescent males and females engage in binge drinking behaviors for the positive expectations related to increased sociability or to reduce social anxieties. Indeed, adolescents frequently claim that they drink for fun, to be happy, to gain confidence, to be cool, or simply out of boredom (Broadbent, 1994; Guise & Gill, 2007). In general, expectancies are considered better predictors of alcohol consumption for adolescents than for adults (McNally & Palfai, 2001). Furthermore, research findings demonstrate that drinking expectancies are closely associated with alcohol use and misuse in both genders (Cronin, 1997; Kairouz, Gliksman, Demers, & Adlaf, 2002). The study of drinking expectancies is based on the assumption that people consume alcohol in order to attain certain valued outcomes (Cooper, 1994). In other words, drinking behavior is motivated by distinct needs that differently mediate precursors and consequences.

Various studies have shown that substance misuse is associated with personality traits (Lammers, Kuntsche, Engels, Wiers, & Kleinjan, 2013). Typically, the literature has demonstrated that high levels of sensation-seeking are positively related to binge drinking (D'Alessio et al., 2006; Greene, Krmar, Walters, Rubin, & Hale, 2000; Ichiyama & Kruse, 1998). High boredom proneness is a common aspect of sensation-seeking that may be related to binge drinking (Carlson, Johnson, & Jacobs, 2010). Boredom is defined as a complex phenomenon in which the level of stimulation is perceived as too low; the failure to reach optimal arousal results in the experience of boredom (Fisher, 1993). In general, boredom in leisure time has been shown to play a significant role in an adolescent's substance use (Caldwell & Smith, 1995; Sharp et al., 2011). Teens who felt bored were more likely to engage in dangerous alcohol abuse (Wegner, Flisher, Muller, & Lombard, 2006) and the escape from boredom is one of the most prominent expectancies for alcohol consumption among adolescents (Gordon & Caltabiano, 1996; Ziervogel, Ahmed, Flisher, & Roberston, 1998). In general, teens report high levels of boredom and disengagement from free time activities (Caldwell, Darling, Payne, & Dowdy, 1999; Larson & Richards, 1991; Sharp et al., 2011; Shaw, Caldwell, & Kleiber, 1996). Regarding gender differences in boredom proneness, scholars have provided contradictory results. Vodanovich and Kass (1990) showed that boys have higher levels of boredom experience than girls. Instead, Seib and Vodanovich (1998) found that women scored significantly higher on the Boredom Proneness Scale than men. However, no studies have suggested consistent gender differences on boredom proneness.

A few studies have examined the relationship between boredom proneness and patterns of alcohol use and the mediating role of drinking expectancies (Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995; Goldstein, Flett, Wekerle, & Wall, 2009; Magid, MacLean, & Colder, 2007). However, these studies mainly focus on young adults rather than adolescents. Lammers et al. (2013) investigated early adolescence and found that drinking expectancies partly mediate the relationship between personality profiles and alcohol use patterns. In particular, the effects of impulsivity and sensation seeking on alcohol use were seen to be mediated by drinking expectancies.

2. Hypotheses

The main objective of this study was to examine how drinking expectancies mediated the relationships between boredom proneness and adolescent binge drinking behaviors in a large sample of Italian girls and boys. Binge drinking was studied as an attempt to cope with the boredom experience of adolescents who seek additional stimulation.

An initial hypothesis concerns the differences between girls and boys in alcohol use as well as in boredom, and drinking expectancies. In line with the literature previously described, we predicted that boys not only use alcohol more frequently and consume higher quantities,

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