

Adolescents' perceptions about alcohol consumption and its relation to exposure to opportunity and the temptation to consume alcohol

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SUMMARY

Introduction

Alcohol is an endemic problem in Mexico. It affects mainly adolescents, and is associated with availability and the individual characteristics and context that favor the likelihood of experimentation, continued use and moving toward problematic use and dependence. Substance use is also associated with exposure and making decisions about one's behavior when faced with the opportunity, so prevention may be more effective when you understand the mechanisms between availability and behavior, and exposure to opportunity and the temptation to consume. This work addresses these constructs in a group of adolescents using a qualitative approach and explores the perception of the constructs, their association with use, and strategies used by adolescents to avoid consumption.

Methodology

The sample was comprised of 60 adolescents; 30 experimenters, and 30 alcohol abusers, divided into six groups.

Results

The results show a clear identification and definition of constructs for exposure to opportunity and the temptation to consume. Family parties and invitations are considered situations associated with exposure to opportunity, and temptation to consume is associated with unpleasant emotions. Regarding coping strategies to avoid drinking, experimenters consider the consequences of consumption, saying no, and respecting rules and decisions, while abusers think of the fun and never refuse an invitation from a friend.

Discussion

Results are proposed for inclusion in models of prevention and care for specific populations.

Key words: Adolescents, exposure to opportunity, temptation to consume, alcohol consumption.

RESUMEN

El consumo de alcohol es un problema endémico en nuestro país. Afecta principalmente a los adolescentes y se asocia con la disponibilidad y con características individuales y del contexto que favorecen la probabilidad de experimentar, continuar usando y avanzar hacia el consumo problemático y la dependencia. El uso de sustancias también se relaciona con estar expuesto a ellas y tomar decisiones sobre su conducta frente a la oportunidad. Así, la prevención puede ser más efectiva cuando se comprenden los mecanismos intermedios entre la disponibilidad y la conducta como la exposición a la oportunidad y la tentación al consumo. Este trabajo aborda estos constructos en un grupo de adolescentes mediante una aproximación cualitativa y explora la percepción de los constructos, su asociación con el consumo y las estrategias que utilizan los adolescentes para evitar el consumo.

Método

La muestra se integró con 60 adolescentes, 30 experimentadores y 30 abusadores de alcohol, divididos en seis grupos. Los resultados muestran una clara identificación y definición de los constructos exposición a la oportunidad y tentación al consumo. Fiestas familiares e invitaciones son consideradas situaciones asociadas con la exposición a la oportunidad; y la tentación al consumo se asocia con emociones desagradables. En las estrategias de enfrentamiento para evitar el consumo, los experimentadores piensan en las consecuencias del consumo, en decir no y en respetar las reglas y decisiones; en tanto que los abusadores piensan en la diversión y nunca rechazarían la invitación de un amigo.

Discusión

A partir de los resultados se hacen propuestas para su incorporación en modelos de prevención y atención para poblaciones específicas.

Palabras clave: Adolescentes, exposición a la oportunidad, tentación por el consumo, consumo de alcohol.

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INTRODUCTION

In Mexico, alcohol consumption is considered a public health problem that affects different segments of the population. The latest report by the National Addiction Survey 2008¹ showed that adolescents are the most vulnerable segment of the population, due to the constant change being undergone in all areas of their lives, as well as their involvement in unhealthy and sometimes problematic behavior such as substance consumption.

In 2006, the Student Drug Use Survey² found an increase in the total consumption of both legal and illegal substances. In the case of illegal drugs, (marijuana, cocaine, inhalants, tranquilizers, and other medicinal type drugs used without a prescription), it was noted that in 2003, drug consumption among adolescents was at 15.2%, whereas in 2006, some 17.8% of young people had taken drugs.

In terms of consumption of legal substances (alcohol and tobacco), there was an increase in alcohol consumption as a starting drug (between one and three drinks at one time, less than once a month) and as a drug of abuse (more than five alcoholic drinks at one time); a situation that affected some 25.2% of the young population. Furthermore, these results reflect how the high social tolerance and low risk perception associated with alcohol abuse is related to the increase in the use of other substances that carry with them a raft of health consequences for young people.

It is important to note that substance consumption is associated with certain characteristics of adolescence, such as seeking identity, autonomy, and independence,³⁻⁷ as well as taking on adult roles⁸ and the concept of immunity to risk; a situation that can favor young people seeking immediate and momentary new sensations.^{9,10}

In pursuit of these new sensations, adolescents occasionally involve themselves in behaviors with a different kind of risk, high-risk activities being the major concern. Risky behaviors engaged in during adolescence can include unprotected sex, an unhealthy lifestyle, beginning drug consumption at an earlier age, and the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.¹¹

Drug consumption is not a public health problem that presents itself overnight, but it is closely related with various risk factors defined as those situations in which it is most likely that a type of behavior will be presented.¹² Risk factors most closely associated with substance consumption are the social environment, low risk perception, high tolerance of the context leading to consumption, exposure to opportunity, and the temptation to consume, as well as stressful life events.^{13,14}

Some authors mention that exposure to opportunity and temptation to consume are necessary conditions for the individual to move down a risky trajectory of consumption, which starts with experimentation and can reach levels of dependency.¹⁵

This situation can initially be explained because the individual finds themselves facing extensive and constant exposure to opportunity, defined as any situation in which the individual finds themselves invited to consume or offered a substance. Another element that contributes to the course of an individual's consumption corresponds to prior experience associated with expected results, giving rise to seeking situations in which consumption is possible, which could be called temptation to consume. However, it is necessary to note that the individual often finds themselves in a constant tradeoff between exposure to opportunity, their interest in consumption, and awareness of the consequences that said consumption can bring.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Studies focused on understanding the primary circumstances in which an opportunity to consume could present itself show that a reduction in supervision of children and adolescents has a causal relationship with the progression between the first consumption opportunity and the first occasion when consumption is sought out of an individual's own interest, whether that be alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or inhalants.¹⁹

The concept of "exposure to opportunity" is occasionally unclear. An initial explanation corresponds to the epidemiological principle of exposure to infectious illnesses proposed by Maxcy in 1943, and which is adapted to the phenomenon of addiction. The principle identifies that the progression in drug consumption is related to the possibility of being around a substance. It is therefore argued that adolescents who have consumed alcohol and tobacco are more likely to consume marijuana, whereas those who experiment with marijuana find it easier to become involved with the consumption of stronger drugs (cocaine, methamphetamine, etc.)²⁰

More recent studies¹⁴ emphasize that exposure to opportunity must be understood as the possibility for alcohol to be consumed, whether through invitation by another person, seeking out the occasion, or even by finding oneself in a circumstance that provides the opportunity without having sought it intentionally. In this sense, another condition necessary for one to be involved in the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs is the temptation to consume, which has been studied as a predictor in maintaining the abstinence of an ex-consumer with indicators of dependency on one substance in particular, and as a predicting factor for relapses, which leads to using coping mechanisms to avoid consumption.

On the other hand, on the trajectory from use to consumption, the temptation to consume is centered on the intention to seek consumption, where the use of habits is involved to reject or resist consumption. Because of this, temptation should be understood as the possibility of consuming alcohol or other substances, as long as the individual finds themselves with the opportunity, and has the intention and the desire to consume.

Another explanation for the temptation to consume involves being in favor of or interested in the consumption of alcohol or other drugs.²¹

It should be pointed out that the consumption of alcohol and the use of drugs are related to the use of strategies for coping with temptation, due to the fact that not all efforts to resolve situations in which there is pressure to consume are effective, which favors consumption leading to abuse.

As such, another factor related to starting, maintaining, reducing, and abstaining from substance consumption is individuals' use of strategies to confront specific situations.¹⁶ Coping mechanisms are defined as concrete efforts used by a person to respond to or solve a specific situation.²²

Within the sphere of addiction, individuals who involve themselves in the consumption of alcohol show coping strategies that reflect some momentary control over the situation; they remove themselves from the event, they accept a drink to avoid others insisting, etc. The individuals who use coping strategies to control, manage, and change their situation achieve solutions to their problems by making decisions, setting out assertive responses, and rejecting a drink, which reduces the probability of being involved in alcohol abuse.²³

When considering some of the factors related to starting, maintaining, reducing, and abstaining from alcohol consumption, various care patterns have been set out that begin by identifying the causes that favor the use and abuse of alcohol and the consequences of these. However, it is also necessary to identify the causes that bring about a start in consumption and which favor a progression through the different stages of the trajectory of addiction, as well as the consumption of different substances.

One way of identifying these causes is through the development of care patterns focused on intermediate variables in the addiction process, and which could be closely related to the individual, such as exposure to the opportunity to consume, availability, the temptation to consume, and coping strategies, which could be the entry point to finding a possible explanation for the reasons why an individual starts consuming alcohol and continues (or not) on the path towards abuse and dependency on this substance, or to experimentation with other substances.

As such, the development of these care patterns requires various elements, such as the identification of mediating variables, their definition, and their conceptualization among the population in which prevention is intended, as well as how to identify the situations associated with these variables, and the way in which individuals find solutions to specific situations related with exposure to opportunity and the temptation to consume.

The present work therefore has the following objectives: firstly, to find out whether there is a clear under-

standing of the meaning of exposure to opportunity and the temptation to consume among the adolescent population. Secondly, to find out the differences between circumstances related to exposure to opportunity and the situations related to the temptation to consume. Finally, to identify coping strategies put into place by adolescents as a form of decision making when faced with alcohol consumption.

METHOD

The data for this research came from a study based on qualitative methodology, using focus groups as a research technique, which favors the exploration of new lines of research, and which seeks to identify information associated with the knowledge, attitudes, and feelings of a particular sample.²⁴

Participants

Six groups of adolescents participated in this study, each with 10 young people between 13 and 16 years of age. Three groups (30 adolescents) were characterized by being exposed to the risk of consuming alcohol or experimentation; that is, they did (53.3%) or did not drink (46.7%) between one and three standard drinks in a typical consumption, at least once a month, and did not report problems related to alcohol consumption; the average age was of the majority (43.3%) was 13 years. In terms of gender, 52.2% were female and 47.8% were male.

The other three groups (30 adolescents) were characterized by being alcohol consumers. Some 66.6% of these consumed five or more, (up to eight or nine) standard drinks in a typical consumption. It should be noted that 33.4% of the participants drank four drinks per occasion, at least once every fortnight. Some 45.7% of the adolescents in this group reported having had problems related to their drinking habits, at school, in their families, and with friends. In terms of age at the time of the study, the majority (54.3% were 15 years old. In terms of gender, 63.4% were male, and 36.6% female.

Instruments

Various questionnaires were used in order to identify the participants: 1. Interview about consumption pattern, which assessed the consumption of alcohol, its quantity and frequency with the following three questions: How often to you consume alcoholic drinks? When you drink, how many drinks do you have during the same occasion or meet-up? How often do you drink five or more drinks in a single day or meet-up? 2. The addiction section of the Problem-Oriented Screening Instrument for Teenagers (POSIT),²⁵ made up of 19 YES or NO questions, of which

only seven were used: Have you had difficulties in school because you drink alcohol? Do your friends get bored at parties that do not serve alcohol? Do your friends take alcoholic drinks to parties? Do you sometimes leave parties because there are no alcoholic drinks? Do you get cravings to drink alcoholic drinks? Do you ever miss school or arrive late to class because you have drunk alcoholic drinks? Have you ever felt that you cannot control your cravings for alcoholic drinks? 3. A subject guide for the discussion in focus groups, which was carried out *ex profeso* for this research, and which was made up of four areas: alcohol consumption, exposure to opportunity, temptation to consume, and finally, coping associated with the perception of effectiveness.

Procedure

Within the activities of the Center for the Prevention and Care of Addictions in the Psychology Faculty of the UNAM, a series of talks were held, related to the prevention of substance consumption in two public secondary schools belonging to the Secretary for Public Education in the south of the city. To complement and support this school-oriented work, adolescents were invited to participate in a voluntary discussion workshop. Firstly, adolescents who experimented or were exposed to risk, and secondly, those who were abusers were identified. Participants were identified via the Consumption Pattern Interview and the POSIT. The adolescents were then formed into six groups of ten, three of which were made up solely of experimenters, and the other three solely by abusers.

After the groups were formed, a discussion was held within the focus groups, following the subject guide. This discussion was carried out over an hour and a half; information was captured using an audio recorder. In order to maintain adolescents' anonymity, pseudonyms were used in the transcription. Furthermore, an observer was included during the group discussion, who took notes on the order, participation, and attitudes of each of the adolescents.

After the group discussion, the information obtained was transcribed in order to start analyzing it. To analyze the information, three or four categories were established in order to classify the adolescents' responses, in compliance with the discussion guide.

RESULTS

In the *area of alcohol consumption* it was noted that the majority of the experimental adolescents (83%) identified that the consumption of alcoholic drinks is a way of harming the body and losing control, while the remaining 17% thought that it was not a problem as long as it was consumed in moderation. On the other hand, for the adolescents who

abused alcohol, 60% considered that consumption was a form of fun and a way to solve problems, while 40% considered it as a way of feeling good.

In terms of the adolescents' *perception in terms of not consuming alcohol*, the results from the group of experimenters showed that 100% considered it a way of taking care of oneself, not damaging the body, and that it was possible to enjoy yourself without alcohol. Among the abusers, 50% considered that there was no such thing as not drinking, because in reality, all teenagers drink a wide variety of alcoholic drinks in large quantities. However, the remaining 50% commented that the only teenagers that do not drink are those who are not interested in having fun.

Among the *primary reasons* for drinking alcohol, it was noted that some 70% of the experimental adolescents perceived that it was out of curiosity, while the remaining 30% thought that the most important reason for consumption was attention seeking and to be part of a particular group of friends. Conversely, 60% of the group of abusers considered that reasons for consuming alcohol were related to group leadership and imitation, 30% mentioned consuming alcohol as a way to solve problems in life, and the remaining 10% mentioned consuming for enjoyment.

The initial proposal for this work was based on the definition of "exposure to opportunity" and "the temptation to consume". Table 1 shows the percentage of agreement among adolescents in terms of the categories that define exposure to opportunity and temptation to consume. As such, for the group of experimenters, exposure to opportunity was defined as an invitation to consume, where alcohol is available, and there exists a tolerance towards consumption, whereas for the group of abusers, the category was defined as drunkenness, responding to an invitation, an offer, and availability of alcohol. In terms of the temptation to consume, the majority of the experimenters defined this as a craving to drink or the urge to consume, while for the abusers, those in agreement considered the interest and urge to drink to fit into this category.

Table 1 shows the percentage of agreement among the adolescents in terms of the categories that define the concept of exposure to opportunity and temptation to consume.

A second proposal for this work was to identify the situations related to these two constructs of "exposure to opportunity" and "the temptation to consume". Figure 1 shows that 66% of the experimental adolescents mentioned that the primary situation for "exposure to opportunity" occurs at family get-togethers, while the remaining 44% described parties with friends as the primary situation. On the other hand, 80% of the adolescents who abused alcohol mentioned sporting events and parties as situations with exposure to opportunity, while the remaining 20% considered recreational invites and events as situations for exposure.

Table 1. Percentage of agreement between the adolescents with respect to the categories that define the concept of exposure to opportunity and the temptation to consume

Question	Categories and percentages			
	Experimenters	%	Abusers	%
What does the following phrase mean for you: "be exposed to an opportunity to consume alcohol"?	• Invitation	35	• Invitation	25
	• That alcohol is available	25	• That alcohol is available	15
	• An offer	20	• An offer	15
	• Tolerating other people consuming	20	• A safe party	10
What do you understand by "temptation to consume"?	• Craving	40	• Drunkenness	25
	• Pressure to consume		• Sharing a moment with your friends	10
	• Urges to consume	15	• Urges to consume	60
	• An urge to feel the effect	30	• Craving	40
				15

In terms of situations related to "the temptation to consume", figure 2 shows that 55% of the experimenters and 40% of the abusers thought that the most important situation was related to unpleasant emotions (sadness, depression, loneliness, rejection, pressure, guilt, etc.) Furthermore, 20% of the experimenters and 10% of the abusers associated it with the presence of family problems, while 25% of the experimenters and 60% of the abusers mentioned that another situation associated with temptation was linked to pleasant moments, either individually or with other people.

The final proposal for this work is around the identification of coping strategies to make the decision between drinking or not, when exposed to opportunity and the temptation to consume. In this sense, table 2 contains strategies to make the decision between drinking or not, what to do to avoid consumption, and what to do when offered a drink. In terms of strategies related to the decision to drink alcohol or not, the results show that the majority (90%) of the experimental adolescents considered that before a teenager decides to drink, they would think about the consequences of their actions, as well as the situation of the consumption; the remaining 10% did not know what they

would do. Among the group of abusers, 80% mentioned that before making the decision to drink, it is important to think about enjoyment and the positive things that happen after consumption (for example, forgetting your problems, feeling part of a group, and pleasing other people) and 20% considered that they only had to think about drinking.

With regard to strategies for avoiding consumption, the majority of adolescents that made up the group of experimenters (53%) suggested alternatives to consumption such as planning games that do not involve alcoholic drinks and respecting the rules of a place that could be considered exposure to opportunity (parties, gatherings with friends, etc.) It is worth mentioning that 47% of the remaining adolescents mentioned that a way of avoiding consumption related to the adolescent respecting their decision not to drink and always saying no, as well as finding other ways of having fun. In the case of the group of abusers, 90% of the adolescents commented that avoiding consumption is complicated, given that "it is not a party without alcohol".

Faced with the offer of an alcoholic drink, 70% of the experimenters mentioned that saying "no" or "I don't like alcohol" are effective strategies. The remaining 30% men-

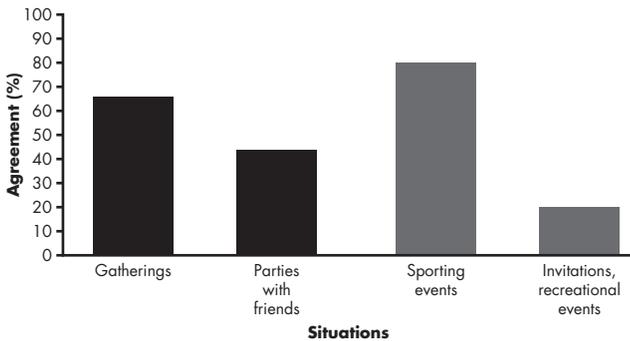


Figure 1. Perception of the primary situations related with exposure to opportunity.

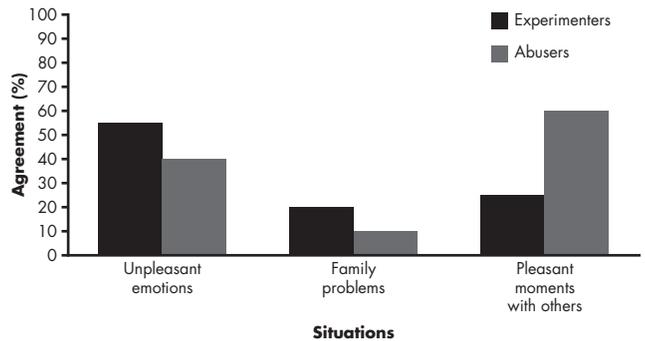


Figure 2. Perception of the primary situation with temptation to consume.

Table 2

Group	Making the decision between drinking or not	%	Avoid consumption	%	The offer of a drink	%
Experimenters	• Consider the consequences	90	• Plan games without alcohol and respect the rules	53	• Say No, or I don't like alcohol	70
	• Don't know what I should do	10	• Respect the decision not to drink	47	• What you're doing is not good, or leaving the place	30
Abusers of alcohol	• Fun and consequences	80	• Avoiding consumption is complicated	90	• I would not reject a drink and I would drink with my friend	60
	• Just I must drink	20	• I don't know what I should do	20		

tioned strategies such as telling the person offering them that "what you're doing isn't good", leaving the place, and avoiding the person approaching them at all costs. Conversely 60% of the group of abusers indicated that they would not reject a friend's offer, so they would accept the drink and consume with them.

Table 2 shows the percentage of agreement between the adolescents in terms of the perception of the possible coping strategies that an adolescent would use when faced with exposure to the opportunity to consume.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Alcohol consumption in Mexico presents an increasing health problem and one that affects a large part of the population, with women and teenagers being the most vulnerable. Until this point, various explanations have been offered with respect to beginning and maintaining alcohol consumption. One of the most important for this work is the proposal by Social Cognitive Theory, which mentions that alcohol consumption is an integral part of psychosocial development and socialization within our culture.²⁶⁻²⁹ As such, the consumption of alcohol by young people comes about as a social influence of culture, family, and friends.³⁰

From the perspective of the experimental groups in this study, there are two concepts with respect to alcohol consumption. One of these is closely related to socialization, and considered an element of sharing with other people, as long as it is consumed in moderation; that is, one or two drinks per occasion. The second is that consumption is considered an unhealthy pastime that often leads to a loss of control over one's behavior and can have associated consequences. However, from the point of view of the adolescents that had consumed alcohol and been involved in its abuse, consumption is related with the concept of alcohol as a way to socialize and have fun.

The findings from this work show that the most important reasons why an adolescent would involve themselves in consumption are curiosity and being part of a group. However, it is important to note that a secondary reason for consumption is to solve problems. These findings are related with the proposal of Villatoro (1999) who

describes involvement in the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs as related with various risk factors and multiple reasons, such as curiosity, seeking identity, belonging to a group, tolerance of consumption, and having a group of friends who consume.¹¹

This work was developed with the objective of finding out whether adolescents understood the constructs of "exposure to opportunity" and "temptation to consume"; from a review of the results of the focus groups it can be noted that adolescents understand and can differentiate between both terms. Various studies^{14,20} show that exposure to opportunity is related with possibilities for consumption without there being an intention to consume. For the adolescents who participated in this work, there is a clear identification of situations in which one could be exposed to opportunity, the most important being an invitation to consume from somebody else, as well as situations in which alcohol is available.

In terms of the definition of "the temptation to consume", the information obtained from the adolescents reflected that they do understand what is meant by temptation to consume, and they stressed two very important factors that give rise to alcohol consumption. One the one hand is the interest in consuming, and on the other is the interest in feeling the effects of alcohol on the body. This information complements that provided by other studies, which highlight the importance of the interest in consumption, as well as the opportunity to consume, being present.¹⁶

Research by Reboussin y Anthony (2001)¹⁹ highlights that one of the situations associated with the progression between exposure to opportunity and the first consumption of alcohol is the reduction of family supervision. These findings are related to the adolescents' conclusions which found that one of the first opportunities to consume is with family; however, opportunities increase to the extent that there are parties with friends in which there is reduced adult supervision, or where there is greater tolerance for the consumption of alcoholic drinks. The opposite was the case in situations related with temptation to consume, given that the majority of situations identified by the adolescents is linked with coping strategies, which are considered a factor for starting consumption. Adolescents who involve themselves in consumption use alcohol as a strategy to alle-

viate unpleasant emotions and they relate it to the pursuit of pleasant emotions and wellbeing, which is in concordance with the findings of Wills and Hirky (1996).²³

A third objective of this work was to identify coping strategies used by adolescents to make the decision between drinking or not. It should be noted that the adolescents concluded that it is not necessary to drink in every situation, and as such, some who decided not to drink based their decision on the negative consequences of their actions under the influence of alcohol. For their part, the adolescents who decided to drink or continue drinking based this on the positive consequences of consumption. According to Social Cognitive Theory, direct experience with alcohol is important to the extent that it continues development and experimentation with the substance, given that it is positively reinforced by the euphoric properties that come about in social interactions and is associated with anticipation of positive results.

The adolescents stressed three important strategies to cope with alcohol consumption. The first relates to planning games that do not involve drinking alcohol (managing and controlling the situation). The second is linked with the decision not to drink (strategies to manage the situation), and the third is to use strategies that allow consumption to be rejected (strategies for momentary control).

From an analysis of the information obtained during the focus groups, it can be concluded that alcohol abuse must be prevented with the aim of reducing the consequences associated with consumption. One way to do this is through development of patterns for prevention and care among segments of the population that are considered focal populations, for whom emphasis is placed on specific components to diminish the phenomenon. The results of this research correspond with the identification of specific elements focused on exposure to opportunity and the temptation to consume, which will allow the development of psycho-educational materials and prevention alternatives focused on coping skills for everyday situations and those specific to alcohol.

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