2012

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31922/disc1.16
Available at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/discovery/vol1/iss1/16

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Quality of Relationships and Alcohol Dependence in Young Adults
Darlene Belen, Allie Ramsay, B.A., & Erin Tully, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology

Background

- Alcohol dependence and abuse in young adults is a growing problem, especially on college campuses.
- High-quality parenting may limit risk of alcohol abuse (Ober, 2012). High-quality parent-child relationships were associated with lower risk of alcohol use in young adults (Shumak, Felitti, & Machlin, 2010).
- Older sibling alcohol use was related to younger sibling alcohol use (Teate, Leuthe, & Chassin, 2000), but sibling alcohol quality was not related to alcohol use (Van Der Vlist, Engel, Mossa, Dokker, & Van der Laan, 2007).
- Having a romantic relationship was related to lower risk of heavy alcohol use (Fleming, White, & Catalano, 2010).
- Alcohol consumption in young adults was predicted by larger peer group's alcohol consumption more so than close friendships alcohol use (Leeuwe, 2007).
- Alcohol use has consistently been associated with high levels of conflict within relationships (e.g., Chermack, 2010). There are several important dimensions of relationship quality (Perros, Sarason, & Sarason, 1993), including:
  - Depth: security and stability of a relationship.
  - Support: degree of availability of the other person in the relationship.
  - Conflict: instability within a relationship.
- Elating research on associations between interpersonal relationships and alcohol use have mostly focused on the presence or absence of relationships; there is limited research on associations between the dimensions of relationships and alcohol use.

Purpose & Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was to better understand how different dimensions of relationship quality (depth, support, and conflict) in relationships with different people (parent, sibling, significant other, and same-sex friend) relate to alcohol dependence symptoms in young adults.

Hypotheses:
- In parent-child relationships, all three dimensions of relationships will be associated with alcohol dependence symptoms. Greater depth and support in the relationship will be linked to fewer symptoms, while more conflict will be linked to more symptoms.
- In sibling relationships, more conflict in the relationship will be linked to more alcohol dependence symptoms. The degree of depth and support will not be associated with symptoms.
- In romantic relationships, all three dimensions of relationships will be associated with alcohol dependence symptoms. More depth and support in the relationship will be linked to fewer symptoms, while more conflict will be linked to more symptoms.
- In same-sex friend relationships, more conflict in the relationship will be linked to more alcohol dependence symptoms. The degree of depth and support will not be associated with symptoms.

Sample

- Students (N = 80) at Georgia State University enrolled in Introduction to Psychology. Recruited through SONA database.

Table 1: Demographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>84% Female</td>
<td>M = 19.64, SD = 1.67, Range = 16-25</td>
<td>64.5% Live off campus with parents</td>
<td>53.1% do not live with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16% Male</td>
<td>46.9% Asian American</td>
<td>35.9% African American</td>
<td>37.8% Hispanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method

- Participants completed two surveys:
  - Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI; Perros et al., 1991)
  - Alcohol Dependence Scale (ADS; Skinner & Allen, 1982)
- Surveys were completed on a computer in the lab using the SurveyMonkey website.
- Pearson correlations were run to test the associations between ADS scores and QRI scores.

Results

Table 2: Correlations between ADS and QRI for Parent (N = 80)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>10.49(2.25)</td>
<td>9.12(3.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Correlations between ADS and QRI for Sibling (N = 73)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>9.48(2.21)</td>
<td>8.61(2.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Correlations between ADS and QRI for Significant Other (N = 45)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>10.22(1.80)</td>
<td>10.53(1.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Correlations between ADS and QRI for Same-Sex Friend (N = 80)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Depth</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>9.04(2.43)</td>
<td>9.56(2.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

- Parent-child relationship hypothesis was partially supported.
  - As expected, depth of relationship between young adults and their parents was negatively correlated with alcohol dependence symptoms, while conflict in relationships between parents and their children was positively correlated with alcohol dependence symptoms.
  - Contrary to our hypothesis, support in relationship with parent was not correlated with alcohol dependence symptoms.

- During a development period when individuals transition to spending less time with parents, the stability and instability of the parent-child relationship seems to be more correlated with alcohol dependence symptoms. Practical availability of parents was not related to alcohol dependence symptoms, which might reflect greater dependence on peers for support at this age.
- Sibling relationship hypothesis was not supported.
  - Contrary to our hypothesis, greater depth and support in relationships between young adults and their siblings were negatively correlated with alcohol dependence symptoms, but surprising was that conflict with siblings was not related to alcohol dependence symptoms. These findings bolster the idea that security and stability in family relationships as well as peer availability of siblings (in our age-matched family member of parents) are important for understanding risk for alcohol dependence in young adults.

- Romantic relationship hypothesis was partially supported.
  - Consistent with our hypothesis, depth and support in a relationship with a significant other were related to fewer alcohol dependence symptoms.
  - Contrary to our hypothesis, conflict with a significant other was not correlated with alcohol dependence symptoms.
  - The associations between alcohol dependence symptoms and security of a romantic relationship were consistent with research on the role of romantic breakup’s in youths’ mental health (e.g., depression). The nonsignificant relationship between conflict and symptoms is consistent with research on associations between alcohol use and interpersonal relationships (e.g., marital conflict, partner violence, but the association is in the expected direction and the small magnitude may be due to the young age and/or level of low alcohol dependence symptoms in this sample.
- Same-sex friend relationship hypothesis was supported.
  - As hypothesized, depth and support of a same-sex friendship were not correlated with alcohol dependence, and conflict with a same-sex friend was positively correlated with alcohol dependence symptoms.
  - The link between unstable friendships and greater alcohol dependence symptoms is consistent with the literature on interpersonal conflict and alcohol use, and those findings suggest that positive friendships might not offer much buffer against alcohol dependence in young adults.

Implications

- Strong family relationships (both with parents and with siblings) may be potentially a protective factor against alcohol dependence in young adults. Moreover, these relationships seem to be more important than non-family relationships in terms of depth and strength of relationships.
- Those findings may lead to new interventions on college campuses, such as intervention programs that include a family component.
- Participants did not indicate for which parent they completed the QRI. In future research, we would like to distinguish mother-child and father-child relationships.
- The depth and support correlation between ADS score and QRI score for siblings was unexpected in light of existing research and suggests potentially important avenues for prevention and intervention research.

References


Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all of the participants who participated in our study. We would also like to thank our fellow research assistants who helped to collect the data: Joelle Allen, Raeli Deonho, Kelly Hertaz, David Holmgren, Ryan Miller, Pidi Montiel, and Taylor Nipper. We would like to thank Shari Gayer for her role in coordinating and organizing the study, and Dr. Erin Tully for her patient mentorship and support throughout this process. Finally, we would like to thank Georgia State University and the Department of Psychology for providing us with the opportunity and resources to participate in this research.