

Summary

Protective Factors Associated with Alcohol Use among College Students: A Contextual Perspective

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Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage indicating a transition from adolescence to adulthood through exploring potential romantic partners and career options, while expanding relationships with one's family of origin (Arnett, 2000). Studies indicate that ambiguity and uncertainty during emerging adulthood may be associated with high levels of distress, mental health problems, and alcohol misuse (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001; Merikangas et al., 2010). Therefore, there is need for further research to determine the protective factors to prevent alcohol use among emerging adults, and inform future intervention efforts to buffer their stress in that transitional life stage.

Alcohol Misuse in Emerging Adults and Protective Factors

Emerging adults are typically between ages 18 to 25 years which runs through college years. National Institute of Health (NIH, 2015) reports indicate that binge drinking and heavy alcohol use are at alarming rates in the US. Recent estimates indicate that 48.2% of college students (18-22 year old youth) use alcohol regularly and 8.5% of the college students are heavy drinkers (NIH, 2015).

In Turkey, alcohol use is a lot less prevalent than European countries and US. Yet, studies consistently show that college students drink alcohol more frequently and in higher quantity, than the general Turkish adult population. An epidemiological survey conducted among 1.720 college students across five cities (İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Mersin, Muğla) indicated that lifetime and past month use of alcohol were 63.3% and 48.5%, respectively (İlhan, Yıldırım, Demirbaş, & Doğan, 2008). These statistics reveal that alcohol is the most prevalent drug of choice among emerging adults with higher prevalence rates than other soft drugs such as cannabis. Therefore, there is need for understanding protective factors to tailor intervention efforts to prevent college student binge drinking or alcohol misuse in Turkey.

Several protective factors have been defined in the literature that alleviate the alcohol use problems or reduce the likelihood of transition to alcohol addiction (Meschke & Patterson, 2003). Common protective factors include family support, cohesion and bonding, functional family relationships, prosocial peers and peer support as well as participation in social activities (NIH, 2003; 2015). In addition, individual's social skills, problem-solving skills, high self-esteem, emotional control and empathy skills were found to be protective factors (Martens, Ferrier, & Cimini, 2007; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). Studies in Turkey also replicated these findings, underscoring the utility of healthy family relationships, coping skills, empathy and social activities as protective factors for alcohol misuse (Çakmak & Ayvaşık, 2007; Siyez & Aysan, 2007).

Contextual Theory

Drawing on the aforementioned findings, the current study investigated the protective factors of alcohol use from a Contextual Theory perspective. According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner's (1986) Contextual Theory, individual's sense of self and relationships are shaped via intergenerational relationships, roles and ongoing family interaction patterns. This net of relationships comprise four interwoven themes: *facts* that contain individual's demographic characteristics and biological dispositions (such as age, ethnicity, sex); *individual psychology* which refers to individual's temperament, personality characteristics, and attachment styles; *systemic transactions* involving roles, triangulations, boundaries and relational patterns in the family of origin; and *relational ethics* which represents the balance of give and take (care giving/receiving) and fairness in the family system as transmitted across generations. In healthy families, the caregiver-receiver relationships are fair, boundaries and roles are clear and family members are loyal and trusting to one another. These healthy

relational patterns are transmitted across generations through parenting and manifest themselves as ‘constructive entitlement’. Individuals that have constructive entitlement seek to preserve other’s rights and care for them when necessary while also demanding their emotional and relational needs to be met. According to Contextual Theory, relational and/or psychological problems in the family occur due to intergenerationally transmitted inequalities and injustices. Such dysfunctional relational patterns generate ‘destructive entitlement’ which may foster individual and relational problems, such as conflict in romantic relationships and alcohol/substance abuse or other psychological problems.

Current Study

Utilizing Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner’s (1986) Contextual Theory, aim of the current study was to investigate the protective factors associated with the frequency of alcohol use among college students. Four main domains of Contextual Theory (facts, individual psychology, systemic transactions, and relational ethics) were matched to the hypothesized protective factors. Domains included age, sex, academic major (*facts*); volunteering in social responsibility projects, empathy and coping skills (*individual psychology*); birth order in family of origin and perceived family functioning (*systemic interactions*); justice, fairness, loyalty, and entitlement (*relational ethics*). It was hypothesized that college students with positive perceptions of relational ethics in their families (i.e. high fairness) would report higher levels of empathy and coping skills as well as more involvement in voluntary social responsibility projects. In addition, relational ethics, empathy, positive coping skills and volunteering were expected to reduce the frequency of alcohol use, acting as protective factors.

Method

Sample

Participants were 220 college students (55.9% female, 40.9% freshman year, $M_{age} = 20.29$). Data were collected from September 2015 through February 2016 anonymously through advertising in social media outlets and online listservs. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be 18 to 25 years old, be currently enrolled in college, and be fluent in Turkish. Those who were eligible and gave consent were directed to an online survey in Qualtrics. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the study sample.

Measures

The survey included a brief demographics form (gender, age, sex, major, volunteering activities) as well

as scales for alcohol use (Addiction Profile Index-Short Version-BAPI; Ögel, Güneş, Koç, Görücü, & Başabak, 2015), family functioning (McMaster Family Assessment Device; Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983; Bulut, 1990), empathy skills (Empathic Traits Measure; Dökmen, 1988), coping skills (The Ways of Coping Questionnaire; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Şahin & Durak, 1995), and perceived fairness and loyalty in one’s family of origin (Relational Ethics Scale; Hargrave, Jennings, & Anderson, 1991). The survey took 10 minutes to complete and participants were debriefed after the data collection. Participation was voluntary and data contained no identifying information of the participants such as names, e-mail addresses, and university affiliations. The Institutional Review Board of the Koç University College of Social Sciences and Humanities approved all study procedures.

Results

Preliminary Analysis and Descriptive Results

Frequency of alcohol use was not statistically different by gender ($t(118) = .62, p > .05$), age ($r = .04, p > .05$), grade ($F(3, 190) = 1.83, p > .05$), or college/faculty student is majoring ($F(4, 181) = .57, p > .05$). Hence, socio-demographic characteristics were not included in the multinomial regression analysis.

Table 2 shows the Pearson and Zero-order correlations among dependent and independent variables. Overall, hypothesized protective factors were inversely correlated with frequency of alcohol use. As the perceived justice and equality in relationships in the family of origin ($r = -.18, p < .05$), positive coping skills ($r = -.17, p < .05$) and frequency of involvement in social responsibility projects ($r = -.17, p < .05$) increased, the frequency of alcohol use in the past year decreased. In addition, participants who were the oldest child in their families perceived their families to be more functional ($r = .17, p < .05$) and used alcohol less frequently. Empathy skills were found to be positively associated with family relations, equality and entitlement with coefficients ranging between .23 and .35 in the predicted direction.

Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis: Protective Factors Associated with Frequency of Alcohol Use

Analyses compared those who have never used alcohol to those who use once a year, 2-3 times a month or at least once a week; regression analysis yielded differences in the protective factors (Table 3). Protective factors that predict regular alcohol use 2-3 times a month were associated with individual abilities and personal characteristics. Young adults with higher empathy skills ($b = -1.25, SE = .64, OR = .28, p < .05$), were more in-

involved in social responsibility projects ($b = -1.45$, $SE = .64$, $OR = .23$, $p < .05$) and were oldest child in their family of origin ($b = -1.56$, $SE = .58$, $OR = 4.75$, $p < .01$) were found to use alcohol less frequently. For example, participants who were the oldest child in the family were 4.75 times less likely to use alcohol 2-3 times a month.

Both individual and familial factors were influential in the most frequent use group. Those who were the oldest child ($b = -1.58$, $SE = .62$, $OR = 4.84$, $p < .05$), have positive coping skills ($b = -.93$, $SE = .43$, $OR = .39$, $p < .05$), perceived high fairness in the family ($b = -.23$, $SE = .11$, $OR = .79$, $p < .05$) had a decreased likelihood of using alcohol for once or more in a week. Moreover, volunteering in social responsibility projects was also a protective factor for alcohol use frequency ($b = -1.56$, $SE = .71$, $OR = .21$, $p < .05$). The model accounted for the 26% of the variance and Chi square test showed that the model had a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(df = 21, N = 220) = 41.97$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The current study investigated the protective factors associated with alcohol use among college students. One of the important findings of the present study was the role of volunteering activities. College students who participated in social responsibility projects had lower frequencies of alcohol use. Hence, implementing social responsibility projects in university campuses and encouraging students' attendance to such projects seem important in promoting psychological wellbeing as well as preventing alcohol abuse. Empathy skills were also inversely associated with the frequency of alcohol use. Prior research indicated that individuals with more advanced empathy skills have the ability to foresee the consequences of their actions, therefore, engage in impulsive behaviors less frequently (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Positive coping skills were also found to correlate with lower alcohol use in the last year, informing intervention programs targeting college students to focus on stress management and coping skills.

Consistent with the Contextual Theory, perceived fairness in the family of origin was identified as a protective factor against alcohol use. These findings can be explained further by Zimmer-Gembeck and Locke's (2007) study which suggested positive family relationships buffer against alcohol and substance use because they promote resilience among family members via responsive parenting and fulfillment of individual's needs. Moreover, birth order in the family of origin was associated with the alcohol use frequency. Drinking behaviors were less frequent among participants who identified as the oldest child in their family. Contrary to the expecta-

tions, general family functioning yielded no associations with the frequency of alcohol use.

In sum, these findings partially support the premises of Contextual Theory. Protective factors that represented the concepts of individual psychology (empathy and positive coping skills, involvement in voluntary social responsibility projects), relational ethics (perceived justice in the family) and systemic transactions (birth order, role in the family) were associated with reduced frequency of alcohol use. However, no such associations were found for factors that represented the facts (age, sex, faculty and grade). As the Contextual Theory suggested, individual's role and perceived justice in the family, social and personal abilities and sense of social responsibility indicated well-being and decreased risky behavior.

Limitations

The findings of the current study should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. The study relied on cross-sectional design and interpretation of the findings cannot indicate causality. Besides, online surveys were distributed anonymously. Therefore, the current sample was not nationally representative of Turkish college students or other emerging adults who were not enrolled in college. Finally, data were collected via self-report and assessment of family relational processes was based on the sole report of emerging adults, and perspectives of other family members were lacking.

Conclusion

This study focused on protective factors such as coping skills, loyalty in family relationships and perception of justice. Findings of this study suggest that treatment and intervention programs targeting college binge drinking should focus on promoting the individual and family level protective factors. Implementing such practices has the potential to enhance positive youth development among emerging adults.