



Variables related to alcohol use in early adolescents in Bogota Colombia: A qualitative study

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Abstract:

Background: The use of alcohol in Colombian adolescents is a widespread phenomenon and public health concern. In order to design effective and culturally sensitive prevention strategies, the variables related to alcohol use by adolescents must be explored. The aim of this study was to explore in detail some of these variables in a population of early adolescents in Bogotá-Colombia. **Methods:** We used a qualitative methodology conducting sessions of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups for data collection. The sample size included 160 students between 12 to 14 years of age from two middle schools in Bogota. Data was analyzed using a thematic analyses approach. **Results:** Our results emphasize the impact of parental example and costumes' in this age group. It is common practice in these communities to provide alcoholic beverages to minors in their own households as a way of "teaching them how to drink". Also, pressure to consume alcoholic beverages comes not only from their peers but also from family members like uncles and cousins. The idea that they can control themselves while drinking is prevalent. Finally, these adolescents are more concerned with immediate risks, mostly related to parental scolding and disappointment, rather than long term consequences, and do not appear to be swayed by the actual risks inherent to the behavior in itself. **Conclusion:** These findings should be taken into consideration when designing and implementing prevention strategies aiming to reduce the use of alcohol in early Colombian adolescents.

Key words: Alcohol Use; Bogotá; Colombia; Early Adolescents; Variables.

Introduction

The risks associated with the use of alcohol by minors have been widely discussed and explored. According to a report from the foundation Leadership To Keep Children Alcohol Free, 40% of the individuals who begin to use alcoholic beverages before turning 13 years of age will abuse or depend on this substance at some point in their lives [1]. A study by Miller et al. found that the use of alcohol by adolescents is related to the three main causes of death in this age group (homicide, suicide and unintentional lesions). Also, the authors describe other risks that include getting involved in fights, dropping school, driving under the influence, using illicit drugs, having unprotected sexual relations and neglecting responsibilities [2]. Finally, a study conducted by Perez and Scoppetta exploring alcohol use in adolescents in 7 Colombian cities, conducted among a sample of 9276 adolescents, reports the following problems associated with the use of alcohol by minors in Colombia: getting involved in a fight (12.3%), skipping school (5.3%), getting into problems with the police (6.5%), getting robbed (5.3%) and being involved in a car accident with a drunk driver (1.4%) [3].

In Colombia, this behavior has increased progressively over the past years, with an estimated 87% of underage minors having tried alcoholic beverages at least once in their lifetime and an increasingly younger starting age that now lies around 12 to 13 years of age making Colombia the country in Latin America with the earliest starting age for alcohol consumption [3-6]. Understanding the main factors associated with this initial encounter is crucial in order to set a foundation for the development of comprehensive, culturally sensitive and effective strategies to combat early alcohol use.

The use of alcohol, like many other health-related behaviors, is influenced by several variables, including personal attitudes, socio-political factors and cultural representations. These variables and their interaction vary from culture to culture and from one age group to another, and have not been explored with this particular population. In order to design effective and culturally sensitive prevention strategies, the variables related to alcohol use by adolescents must be explored. A qualitative research methodology is an approach commonly used to explore complex issues that involve people's attitudes, behaviors, culture or lifestyles on a deeper level [7,8]. The present study used qualitative methods to explore in detail some of these variables

in a population of early adolescents in Bogotá-Colombia.

Materials and Methods

The present study is part of a larger study exploring the social representation of alcohol in adolescents between 12-14 years of age and their community, conducted in two schools in Bogotá-Colombia during the years 2012 and 2013. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Los Andes University approved the project. Written informed assent was obtained from the study participants and written consent from their parents or caregivers.

The sample included 160 middle school students between the ages of 12 and 14, from two public schools in Bogotá. We chose this age group, because, as discussed above this is when most adolescents begin to use alcohol in Colombia. One 7th and one 8th grade class in each school were chosen at random to participate. Inclusion criteria included being a student in one of these two classrooms, having written permission from their caregivers, and wanting to participate.

Both schools are public schools from low income neighbourhoods [9,10]. The locality of Kennedy, where one of the schools is located is home to 14% of the city's residents. 53% (477.534) of the inhabitants of this locality live below the relative poverty line and 13,33% (118.755) below the absolute poverty line [11]. Santa Fe is the locality where the second school is located, specifically in the neighborhood "Las Cruces". This neighborhood is a particularly dangerous zone of the city having one of the highest homicide and suicide rates of Bogotá [12].

Qualitative data was collected via 12 sessions of participant observation, 12 semi-structured interviews and 12 focus group interviews.

The researchers spent 3 school days with each class for a total of 12 participant observation sessions. During these sessions they sat at the back of the classroom and took notes on the interaction amongst peers and their behavior. During breaks the researchers interacted with the students chatting with groups of friends.

After the sessions of participant observation, students were chosen to participate in the interviews and focus groups based on the impression of the researchers who conducted the participant observation that these particular pupils would relay useful information (Purposive sampling).

The focus groups were formed by 8 individuals and conducted in a private classroom within each school setting. Each of the focus groups started with an activity related to the topic of issue in order to introduce the subsequent discussion. A trained moderator conducted each group following an

Table 1: Focus groups questions

Focus Group Questions (Outline)

What do you think about the use of alcohol in adolescents?
 Do you think drinking is normal?
 Has anyone here tried alcohol?
 Where do you get it?
 What risks are associated with the use of alcohol?
 What scares you personally when drinking alcohol?
 What do your parents and family members think of alcohol use? Do they drink?
 What do your friends think? What role do they play?
 Have you ever felt influenced by someone to drink? How did you react then?

outline, while allowing new topics to be discussed as they came about. Each session was approximately 90 minutes long and all of the sessions were audio-recorded. Table. 1 shows the topic outlines for each of the focus groups discussions.

We conducted six in-depth semi-structured interviews with three 7th grade and three 8th grade students at each school. Table. 2 shows the questions that served as the outline for these interviews.

Table 2: Semi-structured interview questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions (Outline)

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I mention the word “alcohol”?
 Sometimes others (like your teachers or parents) say drinking is bad for you, do you think this is true?
 What risks might be associated with the use of alcohol?
 What does your family think of the use of alcohol? Do any of them drink? Have they talked to you about it?
 What do your friends think of the use of alcohol? Do any of them drink?
 Have you ever tried alcohol? When? Where? How many times? With whom? Where do you get it? Where do you drink it?
 Have you ever felt pressured by someone to drink? How did you react?

All of the data was transcribed from the tape recordings. We then developed a basic thematic coding list using the software ATLAS TI (V7.0) after reading each transcript several times. The transcripts were coded and mapped by one of the researchers, adding new codes as new themes emerged. The final codes used to categorize and analyze the data included: “perceived personal risks”, “meanings of alcohol use”, “reasons for consuming alcohol”, “alcohol and family”, “alcohol and friends”, “costs”, “buying and consuming alcohol”, “peer pressure” [7]. We used back translation, translating the quotes from spanish to english and then from english to spanish to make sure we maintained their authenticity and original meaning.

Results

Between the two schools, 64 students participated in the focus groups, 12 participated in the semi-structured interviews and 160 were part of the participant observation sessions. Some of the major variables identified in relation to the use of alcohol included: parental example and costumes’, ease of attainability of alcoholic beverages, peer and family pressure, idea of self-control while drinking, and fear of immediate rather than long term risks.

Normalization of alcohol use by adolescents:

Most of the participants consider the use of alcohol in adolescence is “normal”: *Well, it’s normal because for adolescents’ alcohol is like another beverage, like drinking soda, and the person who hasn’t drink alcohol is weird, and the majority of times it is during family reunions or with friends. And this costs them a lot because sometimes they can get too drunk and lose control...* (14-year-old girl - focus group – April 24, 2013)

Researcher: ¿And do you think all adolescents consume alcohol?

Girl: Not all of them, but the majority... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

Researcher: Do most of your friends think that alcohol can be a problem or do they think drinking alcohol is normal?

Boy: Most of them think it’s normal... (13-year-old boy - semi-structured interview – October 30, 2012)

Researcher: What do you think of someone who tells you they don’t drink alcohol?

Girl: Someone like that? Boring... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

Attainability:

When asked where they usually find alcohol the most common answers are their parent’s houses and stores:

Researcher: Where do adolescents get alcohol?

Girl: They get it from their parents or in stores where they will sometimes sell it to you. (13-year-old girl - focus group – March 27, 2013)

Researcher: Where do adolescents get alcohol?

Girl: Well, lets say the person goes and asks the guy from the store to give him a beer, many will say no, but then they go to a different store and there they’ll say yes so they always go back there and negotiate... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – February 26, 2013)

Researcher: When do adolescents drink?

Girl: When there are parties, family reunions or whenever they want to... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview - October 23, 2012)

When asked where they usually consume alcohol, there were two common answers: During family reunions and at a type of party many of them go to called a “farra” which is organized by other minors in their own houses where they sell and raffle alcohol.

Researcher: Have you ever heard of “farras” or “partis”?

Girl: Yeah...

Researcher: What do you know about them?

Girl: They go there to dance and sometimes they raffle beer and stuff...

Researcher: They raffle beer?

Girl: Yes they raffle beer but mostly they go there to dance...

Researcher: And drink as well?

Girl: Well they sell it there, and they smoke as well... that’s what they say...

Researcher: How do you find out there’s a “farra”?

Girl: Mostly they announce it on “face” (Facebook). (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview - October 23, 2012)

Researcher: How much does a “farra” cost?

Girl: The entrance costs \$2000 pesos (corresponds to about one dollar)

Researcher: And if you want to drink?

Girl: The regular price... \$2000 per beer, the regular... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview - October 23, 2012)

Risk perception:

When asked directly what they first think of when they hear the word “alcohol” during the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, most of the students express negative views on the subject and list several risks associated with this behavior.

“It’s something that damages our organs and... in the future we won’t be able to do the things we can do now if we drink it...” (13-year-old boy - focus group, April 24, 2013)

“Alcohol harms your body; it also harms people because you’re not the same when you’re drunk. You lose control and there are problems....” (13-year-old boy -focus group, October 23, 2012)

“There can be physical or verbal aggressions within the family, there can be accidents in the road and they can lose the people that they love...” (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

The idea of aggression within the family was particularly prevalent:

“When someone drinks they have aggressive conducts. And a man that has a wife can hit her, become aggressive, or touch her in an inappropriate way. A pig, he’s not sober...” (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

In some of the twelve semi-structured interviews, adolescents related their personal experience with their fathers as in the example below:

Researcher: And what does your family think of the

use of alcohol? Do your parents talk to you about it?

Boy: Well, they have had really horrible experiences because of it so they tell me I shouldn't do that.

Researcher: They've had experiences... Do they drink?

Boy: My mom sometimes... my dad was addicted to it and he came home drunk and hit my mother, so my mother got tiered of that and kicked him out of the house... he doesn't drink anymore. (12-year-old boy - semi-structured interview – February 27, 2013)

After inquiring about their personal fears when thinking about drinking alcohol, most of them agree what worries them most is the possibility of their parents finding out, and the subsequent scolding and disappointment:

I think at this age the worst thing is if your parents see you. Because when you're an adult the worse consequences are sickness, car accidents, but at this age it's your parents, because first of all, all of us here depend on our parents, they give us food and everything. So when you're curious of drinking the first thing that you think of is "What if my dad sees me?" (13-year-old girl - focus group discussion – April 17, 2013)

Researcher: Out of everything that you have mentioned, what scares you the most?

Boy: That my parents find out. Other boys and girls: Yeah... (Taken from focus group discussion – April 24, 2013)

Idea of control

This idea of alcohol being harmless "if you know how to handle it" was recurrent:

Researcher: Do you think alcohol has something positive?

Girl: Yes, fun... alcohol makes you have a nice time; it's fun, if you know how to handle it... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2013)

Someone who knows how to drink knows how to control him or herself, to control their emotions when they're drunk. People who don't know how to drink are constantly looking for trouble, they don't control their emotions... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

Boy: My cousin drinks, but he knows how to control it...

Researcher: How old is your cousin?

Boy: 14... (12-year-old-boy - focus group – April 3, 2013)

Caregiver's role

Most of these adolescents believe the use of alcohol is a common practice for adults:

"It's an alcoholic beverage (beer) that parents drink

a lot, everyone..." (13-year-old boy - focus group – April 24, 2013)

Researcher: And do you think that all adults drink?

Girl: Yes. Maybe not constantly, but yeah, if an adult tells me he/she doesn't drink I wouldn't believe them... (13-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

Adolescents also recognize a contradiction between what adults say and what they do:

An adult doesn't have any authority to tell us we shouldn't drink considering they all drink... (12-year-old boy - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

Researcher: And what do you think when teachers or parents say alcohol is bad for you or when TV commercials say "drinking alcohol in excess is bad for your health"?

Girl: Well in part they're right. But I think teachers should apply it first. If they tell us that, they should act on it themselves, because I think they drink as well. (14-year-old girl - semi-structured interview – October 23, 2012)

Most of them could relate an experience where alcohol was involved, either with friends or family members:

It was the "fiesta of La Virgen del Carmen"; it started at 12:00pm and lasted until 4:00am. Each person drank about 15 beers in the neighborhood with our family, my parents, brothers and sisters and my friends from the neighborhood. (14-year-old boy - focus group – September 11, 2012)

It was the weekend and all of my family got together to celebrate a birthday at my uncles' house. They gave us food and then they collected some money to buy alcohol. They bought beer and each person had about five beers, only the adults though, the children had sodas and snacks. (13-year-old girl - focus group – September 11, 2012)

According to some of the interviews, it seems like some parents prefer their children to try alcohol for the first time at home, in order for them to "learn how to drink", feeling this might prevent them from having problems with alcohol in the future:

He (her father) sometimes lets me drink a little bit with him so I can learn how to drink and how to handle it instead of going out to drink and get into trouble with friends... (14-year-old girl semi-structured interview – October 30, 2012.)

In regards to peer pressure, it seems that it is common for their peers and sometimes their family members to try to persuade them to drink:

Boy: I was playing with some friends and there was one beer and they said “drink it, drink it...” and I was curious, so I drank... (12-year-old boy - semi-structured interview – February 27, 2013)

Researcher: Has it ever happened to any of you that someone tells you “have a little drink” or something like that?

Girl 1: Well one day, I was about 10 years old, it was Christmas and we went to my cousins’ house and they told me “have a little drink, It wont harm you”, so I drank a little...

Researcher: Anyone else?

Girl 2: My uncles told me “drink, drink, nothing bad will happen to you, you’ll go to sleep and it’ll go away”

Researcher: So what did you do at that time?

Girl 2: I said yes because they were basically pushing it. (13-year-old girls - focus group – April 10, 2013)

Discussion

These results emphasize the role of parental example and costumes’, ease of attainability of alcoholic beverages, peer and family pressure, idea of self-control while drinking, and fear of immediate rather than long term risks.

This practice seems to be normalized in this community. Aside from finding alcohol in their own households, these adolescents can buy it in certain stores and at parties at accessible costs. This questions the effectiveness of law enforcing strategies in Colombia, suggesting there should be stricter control measures to ensure adolescents do not easily obtain alcoholic beverages. These results are in accord with previous quantitative studies like the one from Perez and Scopetta showing that despite the fact that giving or selling alcohol to minors is against the law in Colombia since 1994, most Colombian adolescents appear to consume alcoholic beverages from an early age [3,13].

We found most of the participants could identify several risks related to this behavior. However, most of them also state that consuming alcohol is normal for adolescents in their community and some even have negative concepts of those adolescents who do not consume it, calling them “boring”. This contradiction may be explained by the fact that these adolescents have been informed of the risks related to alcohol use at school, but the generalized social acceptance of alcohol use in their community, and specifically the social acceptance of alcohol use by minors, constantly undermines and

contradicts this information, and seems to correspond more to how they actually feel and what they do.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that although most adolescents are informed of several risks related to the use of alcohol, and in fact have witnessed some of these consequences in their own households, -where apparently violent behavior related to the use of alcohol is fairly common-, in practice they fear more immediate consequences, like the scolding and disappointment of their parents. This suggests that these adolescents still depend on their parents to set limits for risky behaviors. It also questions the effectiveness of prevention strategies focused on informing this age group of long-term risks of this type of behaviors.

Additionally, the idea of “knowing how to drink”, understood as the capacity to stop drinking when they feel they’ve had enough and behaving in an adequate manner while drunk, is also prevalent in this group and seems to imply that the risk of drinking is relative and depends on whether or not you know how to control it. It is inevitable to wonder how much control 12-to 14-year-olds can exert on their own drinking behavior. In any case, this idea seems to undermine the risk associated with the use of alcoholic beverages and should be addressed and possibly disputed as part of prevention strategies.

This study also emphasizes the important role of caregivers’ example and perception in shaping adolescent’s attitudes toward a particular behavior. In fact, several adolescents in this study recognized and spoke of what they believe is a contradiction between what adults say and what they do, citing the imitation of adults as a reason for drinking.

It also appears, as one might expect, that peer pressure plays’ an important role in modifying these adolescents behavior. It is also interesting to note that pressure to drink in this population not only comes from their friends but also from close family members like cousins and uncles.

Another significant finding from our qualitative study involves the fact that in this population it appears to be customary in many households to provide alcohol to children as a strategy to “teach them how to drink”. This belief is not exclusive of this population. The report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that nearly 6% of 12- to 14-year-olds drank alcohol in the past month and 16% of them obtained it from a parent or guardian [14]. It would be interesting to explore this practice and belief in more detail in future studies and discuss its validity or risk.

In conclusion, this study supports the observation previously described in other studies, that the use of alcoholic beverages by Colombian adolescents starting from early ages is a common practice. Furthermore these results suggest that this practice is normalized and socially accepted by both adults and adolescents in this community. Our results emphasize the impact of parental and adult example, personal beliefs, social practices and law enforcing strategies on this age group. All of these findings should be taken into consideration when designing and implementing prevention strategies with this age group in Colombia. Additional studies should be undertaken to corroborate these findings in different population groups and at different ages.

Limitations

The data described in this study corresponds to a minority of students from two schools in Bogotá and could be representative of these two populations, but one must be cautious of generalizing beyond them. The conclusion of which data can or cannot be extrapolated needs to be left to the discretion of the reader. Other study's exploring these constructs in other parts of the world would be useful and interesting in order to compare the similarities and differences between the variables related to alcohol use in different cultures.

On the other hand, because of the particularities of qualitative research, this study does not intend to provide by any means an estimate of the prevalence of alcohol use or the frequency of particular ideas or factors associated with this behaviour. It intended only to explore and discuss some of these concepts and ideas in detail.

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