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Parental divorce and adolescent excessive drinking

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Summary

Excessive alcohol use in adolescence is a major public health concern in most developed countries. It is important to focus on studying this behaviour among adolescents, as substantial lifestyle patterns are established during this period of life. Excessive drinking in adolescence is an important predictor of alcohol problems in adulthood, leading not only to alcohol dependence, but also to chronic physical and mental health problems in later life. Despite the growing influence of peers in adolescence, the family remains a strong factor affecting the behaviour and shaping the lifestyle of young people.

The main aim of this thesis was to explore the relationship between adolescent excessive drinking and several characteristics of family life. The contributions of both structural characteristics (family structure, socioeconomic position) and psychosocial characteristics (social support, parental monitoring, parent-adolescent communication, adolescents' feelings toward parents) in adolescent excessive drinking were explored. A further aim of this thesis was to explore the contribution of other factors (personality, well-being, leisure time activities, and social support from peers). Based on the aims of this thesis, five research questions were consecutively answered regarding the differences in family, social and personality characteristics between adolescents with three patterns of alcohol use (Chapter 3); the association of parental divorce and other contributing factors with adolescent drunkenness (Chapter 4); the association of risky leisure time activities and parental monitoring with adolescent drunkenness (Chapter 5); the association of family structure and quality of parent-adolescent communication with adolescent drunkenness and frequent alcohol drinking (Chapter 6); and finally, the association of parental divorce with adolescent drunkenness and the contribution of adolescents' feelings toward their parents to this association (Chapter 7). The answers to this research questions are described in Chapters 3 to 7.

Chapter 1 provides general information about excessive drinking in adolescent population, the main dimensions of family environment (family structure, socioeconomic position of the family, social support from family, parental monitoring, parent-adolescent communication, and adolescents' feelings toward parents), and other contributing factors that were explored (personality factors, well-being, peer influence). The aims of the study and research questions are formulated and a model of the studied variables is presented in this chapter as well.

Information about the design of the study is given in *Chapter 2*. It describes two research samples used in this thesis. It further provides a short description of the measures and analysis used.

In *Chapter 3* three groups of adolescents with specific patterns of alcohol use (abstainer, consumer, and excessive drinker) are compared regarding personality factors (extraversion, self-esteem, and aggression), family factors (socioeconomic position, family structure), social support from family and from friends, and well being. The results showed significant differences between abstainers, consumers and excessive drinkers – a risky pattern of alcohol consumption was more likely among adolescents who have divorced parents, higher socioeconomic position, higher scores for perceived social support from friends, extraversion, negative self-esteem and aggression, and lower scores for social support from family and well-being.

Chapter 4 focuses on family factors, exploring the associations between parental divorce and adolescent drunkenness and the contribution of socioeconomic position, family structure, social support from family and well-being. The findings indicate that parental divorce has a persistent influence on adolescent excessive drinking. Parental divorce increased the probability of drunkenness among adolescents. This effect remained statistically significant after the inclusion of the other aforementioned factors. Furthermore, high education level of parents, high family affluence, low level of social support from family, and low level of psychological well-being increased the probability of drunkenness among adolescents.

Chapter 5 deals with the issue of leisure time activities of adolescents and parental monitoring of them, and the associations of these with adolescent excessive drinking. The results showed that participation in risky activities increased the probability of drunkenness among adolescents. This effect remained statistically significant after inclusion of parental monitoring into the model. Moreover, a low level of monitoring by the mother increased the probability of drunkenness. Within the group of 'risky participants' (adolescents who reported participation in at least one of the three risky activities daily or several times a week) those who reported having been drunk scored significantly lower in monitoring from the mother compared with those who did not.

In *Chapter 6* the role of the family structure and the quality of the communication with parents is explored regarding two patterns of adolescent alcohol use (frequent alcohol drinking and lifetime drunkenness). The findings revealed that living in an incomplete family and difficult communication with both parents increased the probability of both drunkenness and frequent alcohol drinking among adolescents when assessing the crude effects of these variables. When assessing the joint effects, all of them still had a statistically significant association with drunkenness, and all of them, except the communication with father, continued to have a statistically significant association with frequent alcohol drinking. Moreover, male gender and higher age increased the probability of both drunkenness and frequent alcohol drinking.

Chapter 7 explores the association between parental divorce and adolescent drunkenness again. Furthermore, the contribution of the adolescents' feelings toward parents into this association is explored. Parental divorce increased the probability of drunkenness among adolescents. This effect remained statistically significant even after inclusion of two dimensions of adolescents' feelings towards the mother (positive and negative affect) in the analysis, while both of these dimensions (positive and negative feelings towards the mother) were associated with drunkenness. Inclusion of the dimensions of adolescents' feelings towards the father (positive and negative affect) decreased the association of parental divorce with adolescents' drunkenness. Both of these dimensions (positive and negative feelings towards the father) were associated with adolescents' drunkenness.

Finally, in *Chapter 8* the main findings are summarized and discussed in the context of the theoretical background. Next, the strengths and limitations of the study are discussed and the possible implications for future research and for public health practice are addressed.

Understanding the factors influencing excessive alcohol use in adolescence, and the mechanisms of their influence is important for its prevention and for health promotion. The findings of this study support the importance of family context in this risk behaviour of adolescents. The negative impact of parental divorce (or living in an incomplete family) on adolescent excessive drinking is relatively well-known from a number of studies. However, the findings of this thesis showed that other aspects of family life and parent-adolescent relationship contribute. This may offer additional cues to decrease the negative effects of parental divorce on adolescents' health behaviour.

