

I'm Mad and I'm Bad: Links between Self-Identification as a Gangster, Symptoms of Anger, and Alcohol Use among Minority Adolescent Detainees

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Abstract

This preliminary study examined whether anger and identification with the “gang member” peer group are associated with heavy alcohol use. Participants were 91 (53.8% male) juvenile offenders in four juvenile probation camps in Southern California who completed a self-report survey. Over half (53.4%) indicated that they best fit in with the “gang member” peer group. In a multivariate model, identification with the “gang member” peer group was associated with heavy alcohol use during the past 30 days prior to their incarceration. Identification with peer groups other than gang members may prevent juvenile offenders from engaging in heavy alcohol use.

Keywords: alcohol, anger, gangs, peer group, juvenile offenders

Introduction

Alcohol use has been associated with serious negative consequences among adolescents, especially among those who are in the juvenile justice system. Among adolescents and young adults, the majority of offenses such as substance use-related crimes (D'Amico, Edelen, Miles, & Morral, 2008; Kandel, 2002), illicit drug use (Barnes, Welte, & Hoffman, 2002), physical assaults (D'Amico et al., 2008; Wechsler et al., 1998; White, Tices, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2002), sexual assaults (Abbey, 2002; Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1997), homicide (D'Amico et al., 2008; Roe-Sepowitz, 2007; Windle & Windle, 2006), and property crimes (D'Amico et al., 2008; Wechsler et al., 1998) are committed while

under the influence of alcohol. Furthermore, alcohol abuse is one of the strongest predictors of recidivism (Myner, Santman, Cappelletty, & Perimutter, 1998), and alcohol is one of the drugs most often used among juvenile delinquents (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2004). For these reasons, the prevention of alcohol use subsequent to release is vital for adolescents to successfully transition into the general population.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether anger, identification with the “gang member” peer group, and the interaction of these two variables are associated with heavy alcohol use among a sample of juvenile offenders. Juvenile offenders, regardless of the crime committed,

have higher levels of anger (Plattner et al., 2007; Ruchkin & Eisemann, 2000). Anger is associated with adolescent alcohol use in the general population (Swaim, Deffenbacher, & Wayman, 2004; Terrell, Miller, Foster, & Watkins, 2006; Weiner, Pentz, Turner, & Dwyer, 2001); however this link has not been clearly established among juvenile offenders. A fair amount of attention has been given to the influence that actual gang membership has on delinquent behavior among juvenile offenders. However such studies have not addressed those adolescents who identify with the culture of gangs but are not necessarily actual gang members. The concept of “peer group identification” accounts for both types of adolescents: (1) those who socially participate in the peer group that they identify with (e.g., gang members), and (2) those who identify with a peer group regardless of the extent to which they are actively involved with that peer group (Sussman et al., 2007). Hence, adolescents who are not actual gang members may nevertheless identify with the “gang member” peer group and adopt some of the typical gang member characteristics (e.g., aggressive behaviors, alcohol and drug use).

Methods

Sample

The data described in this article are from the baseline assessment of an adolescent substance abuse and HIV prevention (SUHIP) pilot program adapted for use with youth in two all male and two all female Los Angeles area 24-hour probation camps. Each of the four camps in this study had a maximum capacity of 120-125 youth. The camps were chosen because the PI has worked with these camps previously, and these camps were not currently involved in any other outside prevention programs. Hence, the possibility of program contamination effects was minimal. All participants had been arrested and were currently serving a sentence assigned to them by the Juvenile Court System. Ninety percent of the offenses in these probation camps are typically for excessive truancy from school, non-violent property crimes, and drug related crimes. Seventy percent of this population admitted to substance abuse through self-report,

which was also validated by arrest records. Eighty percent of the study sample had drugs in their system at the time of their arrest. Offenders with drug dependency are sentenced to camps (other than the ones in our study) for residential drug treatment.

To be eligible for the study, adolescents had to have been enrolled in the probation camp for at least two weeks. Those with diagnosed medical and psychiatric conditions, those with a history of behavioral problems requiring alternative care, and those who were otherwise unadvised by probation camp administrators were excluded from the study.

A total of 91 participants were recruited for this pilot study. Despite the fact that this sample size of 91 was modest, it gave us the ability to detect, with 80% power, the following differences between heavy alcohol users and non/moderate alcohol users: (1) a .60 + standard deviation unit difference in anger, and (2) a 28% + difference in rates of “gang member” peer group identification. These a priori calculations corresponded to effect sizes that are in between “medium” and “large” (Kraemer & Thiemann, 1987).

Procedure

Participant recruitment occurred during two successive cohorts; the first cohort was surveyed in February 2006 and the second cohort was surveyed in July 2006. During school hours, youth received information regarding the project through classroom presentations conducted by the project’s research assistant. Interested adolescents were scheduled to meet with the research assistant at a later time to go over the study in greater detail and obtain informed consent. If an individual decided to participate, he or she read and signed the informed consent in the presence of study staff. Parental/legal guardian consent and consent from probation staff were then obtained prior to administering the baseline assessment to the adolescent. Probation staff consent was required since youth are officially wards of the Juvenile Probation Camp System while incarcerated. Completion of the baseline assessment occurred within two weeks of the youth signing of the consent form.

The assessment was conducted on a computer in a private room using the ACASI (Audio Computer Assisted Self Interview) software.

Ninety-one out of the 133 adolescents (68.4%) who were approached to participate in the study completed the baseline assessment. Of the 42 adolescents who did not complete a baseline assessment, five of them chose not to participate, 28 of them did not successfully obtain parental consent, and 9 of them had gathered the necessary consent forms but were absent on the day of data collection.

Measures

The assessment consisted of variables found in the Monitoring the Future survey (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2002), Profile of Youth Experience (DISA) survey (Eggert, Herting, & Thompson, 1996), and the Teen Health Survey (Misovich, Fisher, & Fisher, 1998). The vast majority of these variables are directly related to substance use and HIV-related behaviors. For the questions, below, participants were asked to respond in reference to the 30 days prior to the day that they were incarcerated.

Alcohol use. Alcohol use was assessed with the question, "On how many occasions during the past 30 days [prior to incarceration] did you have alcoholic beverages to drink (more than just a few sips)?" This item originated from the Monitoring the Future survey (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2002). Response options for this item ranged from 0 (0 times) to 6 (40 or more times). Since the response options did not represent equally spaced intervals (e.g., 1 = "1-2 times" and 5 = "20-39 times"), parametric tests were not possible. Therefore we collapsed responses into two categories: (1) those who drank six or more times in the month prior to their arrest (heavy drinkers), and (2) those who did not (non/moderate drinkers). The criterion of six drinking occasions in the past month was used because this frequency has been defined as "problematic drinking" for adolescents (Division of Alcohol and Substance Use, 2007; Hingson, Heeren, & Winter, 2006).

Anger. Anger was assessed with the questions, "When I got really mad [in the 30 days prior to

incarceration], I felt like I might lose control"; "I got easily annoyed or irritated." These items originated from the Profile of Youth Experience (DISA) survey (Eggert et al., 1996). Possible responses for both questions ranged from 0 (Never) to 6 (Always). The answers to these two questions were added to create a total score with a possible range of 0 to 12. Standardized scores of this anger variable were used in hypothesis testing. Cronbach's alpha = .77.

Peer group identification. Peer group identification is typically assessed with one item to determine which peer group(s) adolescents identify with the most (Sussman et al., 2007). Similarly in this study, peer group identification was assessed with the question, "People often hang out in different groups. Choose the letter of the one group that you best fit in with [prior to incarceration]." Participants chose from a list of fifteen peer groups based upon the work of Sussman (1990). One of the peer groups was "gang members". Those who selected this peer group were labeled as having a "gang member" self-identification. Those who identified with any of the other peer groups: "[the] regular group", "nerds", "actors", "aggies", "progressives", "populars", "loners", "brains", "surfers", and "jocks", "taggers", "heavy metalers", "skaters", "stoners", and "rappers" were categorized as "non-gang members." An additional peer group called "Other" (homies, boyz, crew, etc.) was added to the list based upon feedback from probation camp officers about common peer groups among the juvenile offenders. This peer group was added to the "non-gang member" category.

Demographic variables. Previous research among adolescents indicate that males (CDC, 2005) older adolescents (CDC, 2005), Hispanics (CDC, 2005), those who do not live in a two-parent household (Bu et al., 2002), and those of lower socioeconomic status (Bersamin, Paschall, & Flewelling, 2005) are more likely to use alcohol. Therefore, we considered age, ethnicity, living situation at home (living with both parents vs. not living with both parents), and the number of people living at home (a proxy for socioeconomic status) as potential covariates in the analyses. Previous research has also demonstrated that peer influences are strongly

associated with adolescent alcohol use (Windle et al., 2008). Therefore the following question was considered as a potential covariate: “I felt pressured by my friends [in the 30 days prior to incarceration] to use alcohol and/or drugs.” The response options for this item ranged from 0= “Not at all” to 6= “Every day.”

	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>
Gender		
Male	49	53.8
Female	42	46.2
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	51	56.0
African American	25	27.5
Other	15	16.5
Live w/ both parents at home		
Yes	24	26.4
No	64	70.3
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Age	16.35	1.13
People in Household	3.80	1.72
Pressure from friends to use drugs/alcohol (scale= 0-6)	0.56	1.33

Notes. Frequencies for the variable “Live w/ both parents at home” do not add up to the total sample size due to non-response from three participants. No differences were found between heavy alcohol users and non/moderate alcohol users on all of the demographic variables.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 91)

Analyses

All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 16.0. First, demographic characteristics were described with frequencies and percentages for categorical variables, and means and standard deviations for continuous variables. Next, non/moderate drinkers and heavy drinkers were compared on the independent variables: anger and “gang member” peer group identification, with a chi-square test and an independent samples t-test, respectively ($\alpha = .05$). Last, a multiple logistic regression model was performed to examine whether anger, peer group identification, and the interaction of the two variables were associated with heavy alcohol use, after adjusting for demographic variables that were significantly associated with the dependent variable.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the sample. Slightly over half of the participants (53.8%) were male. The majority were Hispanic (56.0%) and African American (27.5%), and between the ages of 14 and 18 years (M = 16.35 years, SD = 1.13 years). This sample was a relatively accurate representation of the four probation camps utilized in this study in regards to these demographic characteristics. The majority of participants (70.3%) reported that they do not live with both parents when they are at home. Mean number of people in the household was 3.80 (SD = 1.72). Peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol was relatively low (on a six-point scale; M = 0.56, SD = 1.33). Non/moderate drinkers and heavy drinkers did not differ on any of the demographic variables; therefore none of them were included as covariates in subsequent analyses.

	Non/Moderate Drinkers (n= 47)		Heavy Drinkers (n=42)	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Anger*	6.00	4.57	8.07	2.97
	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>%</u>
Peer group identification**	17	37.0	29	63.0
Gang members	28	70.0	12	30.0
Non-gang members				

Note: Frequencies for each variable do not add up to the total sample size because of missing responses.

*p < .01. **p < .001.

Table 2. Anger and Peer Group Self-Identification by Alcohol Use Level

Anger and peer group self-identification by alcohol use level

Table 2 presents differences between non/moderate drinkers (n = 47) and heavy drinkers (n = 42) on anger and identification with the “gang member” peer group. Heavy drinkers had significantly higher scores on anger (M = 8.07; SD = 2.97) than non/moderate drinkers (M = 6.00; SD = 4.57; $t = 2.54$, $p < .01$). Nearly two thirds (63.0%) of those who

identified with the “gang member” peer group were heavy drinkers, compared to 30.0% of those who did not identify with this peer group ($\chi^2 = 9.37, p < 0.001$).

	<u>OR</u>	<u>95% CI</u>	<u>AOR</u>	<u>95% CI</u>
Anger (standardized)	1.74*	1.10-2.74	1.82	0.91-3.64
Gang member (vs. non-gang member)	3.98**	1.61-9.82	3.14*	1.19-8.27
Anger x gang member			0.65	0.24-1.80

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 3. Logistic Regression of Heavy Alcohol Use (n = 89)

Logistic regression of peer group identification

Table 3 displays the unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios for the logistic regression of heavy alcohol use (vs. non/moderate use). Anger was associated with heavy alcohol use in the unadjusted model (OR = 1.74; $p < .05$); however this association was not significant in the adjusted model. Those who identified as “gang members” were over three times more likely than those who identified with other peer groups to be heavy alcohol users (OR = 3.14; $p < .05$). The anger x gang member peer group interaction term indicated that the combination of high anger and identification with the “gang member” peer group was not significant, and do not place an individual at an increased risk for heavy alcohol use beyond their additive effects.

Discussion

In a sample of predominantly African American and Hispanic juvenile offenders, we found that both anger and identification with the “gang member” peer group were associated with heavy alcohol use in the month prior to arrest. The anger-alcohol use relationship demonstrated in this study is consistent with previous research among non-juvenile offenders (Swaim, 2004; Terrell et al., 2006; Weiner et al., 2001). The propensity for high risk peer groups (including “gang members”) to consume alcohol use has been found elsewhere (Sussman et al., 2007). However, no known studies have examined

whether the “gang member” peer group has higher rates of alcohol use relative to other peer groups. Our findings provide preliminary evidence that this is the case.

The fact that over half of the participants identified with the “gang member” peer group (out of 16 other groups that could have been chosen) strongly suggests that the gang culture is relevant to many juvenile offenders. This is not surprising, since a substantial proportion of juvenile offenders are either current gang members, or they are drawn to gang membership through their fellow inmates (Curry & Decker, 2003; Bernburg, Kronh, & Rivera, 2006). The fact that the “gang member” peer group is prevalent among incarcerated youth, coupled with the fact that this group had increased rates of alcohol use, suggests that the “gang member” peer group may be the most salient one to target for alcohol prevention efforts being made in the juvenile justice system.

Contrary to previous studies of non-juvenile offenders (CDC, 2005) none of the demographic variables assessed in our study were significantly associated with alcohol use prior to incarceration. Some possible explanations for this finding are presented here. First, over 90% of our sample consisted of ethnic minorities; hence, comparisons between ethnic majorities (e.g., Whites) and ethnic minorities were not possible. Whites generally have lower rates of alcohol use compared to ethnic minorities (Austin & Wagner, 2006; Ho, Kingree, & Thompson, 2007). Second, the gender gap in alcohol use is shrinking among high school-aged adolescents (CDC, 2005), and proportion of females arrested for liquor law violations have increased relative to males (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Our results support such findings. Third, consistent with our findings, age differences in alcohol use problems are less pronounced among juvenile offenders relative to non-delinquent adolescents (Ho, Kingree, & Thompson, 2007). Last, Segal and colleagues (1982) concluded that incarcerated youth are more likely to use alcohol as a means to cope with psychological symptoms as opposed to peer pressure. This supports our finding that pressure from friends to use drugs and alcohol is not

associated with alcohol use. Although our findings suggest that juvenile offenders are equally prone to alcohol use regardless of their demographic characteristics, we strongly advise, nevertheless, that demographic characteristics are important to consider in future research with similar populations. Variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are associated with recidivism among delinquent adolescents (Bernburg, et al., 2006).

Limitations

A few limitations of the present study that were not addressed earlier should be considered, despite the fact that the findings were consistent with our hypotheses. First, because the design of this study is cross-sectional, causal relationships between variables cannot be inferred. A longitudinal study is needed to clarify the nature of the associations between anger, gang member peer group identification, and alcohol use among juvenile offenders.

Since the results of this study were based on participants' self-reports, some participants may have underreported or over-reported feelings of anger, alcohol use and self-identification with high risk peer groups. This may be an attempt to self-present in a way that they perceive as desirable to either the researchers or their peers (Ong & Weiss, 2000). For this reason, interpretation of self-reported data should be made with some caution.

Our results are based on a relatively small sample of juvenile offenders, most of whom were either Hispanic or African American, and nearly half of whom were female. Therefore, our results may not generalize as well to other ethnic groups, as well as to juvenile offenders outside of California. Additional research on other ethnic groups is warranted to further understand variables that are associated with alcohol use among high-risk adolescents. For example, it has been suggested that the background characteristics and behaviors/practices of Asian gang members are strikingly different than those of other ethnic gangs (Pih & Mao, 2005). To maintain confidentiality, probation camps did not release information on participants' offense history. Therefore, we are not certain as to

whether the analytic sample was representative of the four probation camps being studied in regards to offenses committed.

Implications

A considerable amount of attention and resources have been devoted to drug addiction treatment for youth incarcerated in longer-term facilities. Indeed, such treatment can dramatically reduce criminal activity in adulthood (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2004). In this study, we sampled adolescents who did not have a current mental health or substance use disorder, and were serving relatively shorter sentences (4-6 months) for less flagrant offenses. Such adolescents represent an important population to target for drug prevention services, since they have high rates of drug use at the time of arrest but have not yet developed an addiction disorder.

Our findings suggest that reductions in anger and a weaker identification with the "gang member" peer group may lead to reductions in alcohol use. This conclusion is consistent with the findings that anger management programs are effective among incarcerated adolescents (Patrick & Rich, 2004), and that alcohol use is an endemic feature of the gang member lifestyle (Hunt & Laidler, 2001). Prevention programs that have been successful among other high-risk youth may be successful in reducing alcohol use among probation camp youth. For example, Reconnecting Youth has been effective in reducing drug involvement as well as other co-occurring problems such as poor school performance, aggression, depression, and personal control among potential high school dropouts (Eggert & Kumpfer, 1997). Street Smart has been effective in reducing high risk sexual behaviors and drug use among runaway youth (Rotheram-Borus et al., 2003).

Conclusion

The unique contribution of our preliminary study is that identification with the "gang member" peer group is associated with alcohol use among juvenile offenders. Since peer group identification does not automatically imply actual group membership, our findings suggest

that the influence that the gang culture has on alcohol use may not be restricted to actual gang members; it may also include those who idealize gangs but are not currently gang members. Secondly, since our analyses adjusted for

variations in pressure from friends to use drugs and alcohol, our findings suggest that the influence of the “gang member” peer group on alcohol use is independent of the influence of one’s immediate friends.

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- i Probation Camps (Camp Community Placement) in California are entities that provide intensive intervention in a residential treatment setting as a result of court mandated probation status. Probation camp placement typically lasts 4 - 6 months. Youth who are not successful in probation camps are placed in longer-term facilities that are similar to adult prisons. The Probation Camp system is not to be confused with militaristic style “boot camps” that utilize a regimen of physical training coupled with a confrontational “in your face” approach that is devoid of treatment interventions. Probation Camps are also not to be confused with California Juvenile “detention” centers that are geared to provide short-term housing (30-45 days) in order to diagnose and assess the juvenile’s proper probation camp placement.
- ii Approval from the Chief of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, the Chief of the Los Angeles County Juvenile Probation Department, and IRB approval from all of the organizations involved were obtained prior to the implementation of the study.
- iii Those with literacy problems had the consent form read to them by the research assistant. All prospective participants were assured that study participation was voluntary and will in no way affect their school grades or sentence. They were also informed that other sources of personal information (e.g., their camp records) would not be used in the study. Confidentiality of the participants’ responses was maintained with an extensive security system with firewalls to limit access to the data.
- iv Additional questions regarding anger were not included, since the assessment already contained several items from several surveys, and the prevention of participant burden was critical. Despite the limitation of having only two items to assess anger in this pilot study, we proceeded with our analyses since the internal consistency reliability of these two items (Cronbach’s alpha) was acceptable.