Gender Differences in the Drinking Patterns of American and Hong Kong Adolescents

A Cross-cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among approximately 100 high school students each in Hong Kong and one small mid-western town in the United States. We intended 1) to examine differences between the two cultures in sociocultural factors affecting the students' first drinking experience, their drinking levels, and definitions of alcohol use; and 2) to see whether gender, differences in addition to cultural differences, influence the above variables and associations among these variables. As expected, American adolescents are more likely than Hong Kong adolescents to drink, to drink more frequently, and to drink higher quantities. Hong Kong adolescents tended to take their first drink earlier than U.S. adolescents. However, an association between early and later drinking present in the U.S. sample, was not found in the Hong Kong one. Definitions of alcohol use were influential in determining drinking levels. The data also show that gender differences in drinking levels and the social processes leading to alcohol use are more pronounced in the U.S. than in Hong Kong.

Introduction

SOCIOLOGISTS HAVE NOTED the influence of cultural factors on drinking behavior since the early part of this century (Ullman 1958; Bales 1946; MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969; Straus 1984; Bacon 1991; Engs, Slawinska, and Hanson 1991; Heath 1991). Individual drinking patterns and attitudes related to alcohol vary according to society's cultural orientation toward alcohol (Kinney and Leaton

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Cultural orientations vary along a continuum from total abstinence, where alcohol use is forbidden, to one in which it is permitted to drink to overcome personal tensions and needs — a utilitarian use (Bales 1946; Kinney and Leaton 1983; Orcutt and Harvey 1991). In between these two views are cultural attitudes that promote ritual use of alcohol i.e., that is associated with religious and special ceremonies, and a convivial usage, where the emphasis is to enhance social relationships (Kinney and Leaton 1983; Lolli, Serianni, Golder, Balboni, and Mariani 1953). In a highly heterogeneous society such as the United States, these orientations vary according to subgroup affiliations which means that no one attitude predominates and therefore constitutes an attitude of ambivalence toward alcohol (Ullman 1958; Larsen and Abu-Laban 1968). To use Room’s terminology (1976), conflicting norms and values exist. Moreover, each of these cultural orientations has been associated with rates of problem drinking and alcoholism.

In general, orientations toward abstinence, ritualistic and convivial usage result in fewer alcohol problems in society (Kinney and Leaton 1983). However, in an abstinence oriented society such as the Muslim and Mormon cultures, if one drinks, the chances are great that they will do so problematically (Straus and Bacon 1953; Mizruchi and Perrucci 1962; Rivers 1994). High rates of problem drinking are generally associated with societies where consensus regarding rules and norms for drinking are lacking (Plaut 1967; Larsen and Abu-Laban 1968; Kinney and Leaton 1983; Rivers 1994). Compared to the United States, Hong Kong is a relatively homogeneous culture with a high consensus of norms and traditions, especially in terms of the family system (Lau 1981). Drinking is enjoyed during special occasions in a ritualistic way and at mealtime with family (Singer 1972). Of course, excessive use of alcohol occurs sometimes. However, aggressive and violent behavior, as a result of excessive drinking, are strongly sanctioned and is rare (Hsu 1970; Sue and Nakamura 1984).

Although these drinking orientations seldom exist in pure form in modern societies, one or the other seems to dominate. Accordingly, the intent of this paper is to examine youth drinking in a society representing a convivial orientation, Hong Kong, and one illustrative of an ambivalent orientation, the United States.

Teenage Drinking in Hong Kong and the U.S.

While research on U.S. adolescents and drinking is extensive, data relative to Chinese youth on this subject is almost non-existent. Most of the literature on drinking among the Chinese comes from studies of Chinese abroad in foreign countries such as the United States (Heok 1990; Edwards, Thurman, and Beauvais 1995). Drinking among Chinese in the United States, while not uncommon, is not