

The Perceptions of High School Students from Inner of Brazil about the Consumption of Alcohol

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Abstract

Objective: To describe the students' perception about the consumption of alcohol. Methodology: We used a qualitative approach through focal group with 24 high school students in public and private schools from inner Brazil. The speeches were recorded, transcribed and categorized by the software Alceste or by analyses of contents. Results: The Alceste analyses found four classes (Consumption of alcohol, Motivation, Forces of Influence and Control, Consumption consequences), and the analyses of contents found the fifth: Preventing and Controlling Perspectives. Conclusion: Accessibility factors, social and group acceptance were significant in inducing the use of alcoholic beverages. The courage felling is mainly associated to boys; as strong differences in use factors is related to sex. The adolescent as agent of change, the family and low compliance laws could be treated as the main prevention strategies for public services. The social media as the private versus public schools is strongly associated to prevention feelings.

Descriptors: *Addiction, Drug, Drug abuse; Focal Group, Substance abuse.*

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a transitional period in which multiple psycho-biological transformations occur for the individual's preparation to adult life. These transformations make teenagers vulnerable to a series of situations and risk behaviors (Knobel, 1992; Ferreira, 2007) including the consumption of psychoactive substances or alcohol (Carlini-Cotrim, 2000). The consumption of psychoactive substances or alcohol by teenagers and young adults may provoke several negative consequences, from social and school problems to more serious consequences including morbidity and mortality (OMS, 2005).

In the literature, the profile of users of alcohol among teenagers is well known (Martins, 2008; Cerqueira, 2011), as well as the risk factors for the use of alcohol or psychoactive substances (Morales, 2017), but qualitative studies about the feelings involved in this process are still scarce. Works with social moral judgment among students that consume alcohol beverages (Cruz, 2009). Works with family conceptions and work with more general views are still needed (Brusamarello, 2008).

Knowing the perceptions, expectations and feelings of students about use as much alcohol as of psychoactive substances is a key point and initial construction of public policies of prevention. It still becomes more relevant in the context of schools, where students share their feelings with each other. The school is an ideal scenario for the implementation of these policies (Silva, 2016). In this sense, this study's goal is to describe the students' perception about the use and abuse of alcohol from schools of inner of Brazil.

Material and Methods

This is a qualitative approach research that was carried out in a inner Brazilian city in Minas Gerais state, Uberlândia, that has for the census of IBGE (2010) measured 604,013 inhabitants, per capita income of R\$1,126.57 (USD\$ 660,35; R\$ 1.706 = USD\$ 1) and a broad educational network: elementary school (n = 74,569 students), high school (n = 28,204 students) and university (n = 32,666 students). Three public and one private school located in different areas of the city that covering different social and economic levels, picked out by lot, were part of the study. The sampling was by convenience, based on the decision of the school to participate in the search.

Were exanimate 24 high school students, six of each four studied school. The inclusion criteria were voluntary participation acceptance of the student and parent/guardian contentment with signature of the Informed Consent Form. This sampling also was by convenience once depends from the participation acceptance. Was granted to all the participants' anonymity and the right to not participate in the study (exclusion in any time).

It was used as research strategy a focal group that enables the gathering of information about the topic, from dialogue and debate with and among the group (Martins, 2008). The students were interviewed in groups from six students, were sample 24 students.

The meetings with the participants happened in private rooms conceded by the participating schools and they had maximum duration of 50 minutes. The application of focal group followed a script with the following guiding questions: What do you think about the consumption of alcohol and other drugs by young people? What motivates teenagers to consume alcohol and other drugs? What are the possible consequences for the consumption of alcohol and other drugs by young people? To this technique, it was taking into consideration the recommended steps: a mediator responsible for the beginning, motivation, development and conclusion of the debates; a reporter and an observer. The speeches were recorded through digital media and fully transcribed. The speeches were one nurse and one nursing trained student. The study followed ethical principles and had the approval of the research ethics committee from Federal University of Uberlândia (under number 1035/2010).

It was used the software Alceste 4.5 (*Analyse Lexicale par Contexte d'un Ensemble de Segments de Texte*) for speech analysis. The software allows a quali-quantitative analysis of textual data having as base laws of vocabulary distribution (cluster analysis), through different stages of discursive material segmentation (Alceste, 1990). We used only the qualitative approach. Such analysis consists in divide the elementary context units (small sentences) in several classes, depending on the vocabulary they have, from the Chi-square meaning test. From this point, the software showed the text segmentation and the class formation in a dendogram (a diagram that organizes certain variables), in which originated the items that contemplate the perceptions of the participants about the investigated topic.

The Alceste software found four classes categorized in Consumption of alcohol, Motivation, Forces of Influence and Control, Consumption consequences. After the analysis performed by the program transcripts a fifth category was identified by researchers, by analyzing the content following (Bardin, 2011), which emerged a class that was named Prevention and Control Perspectives.

Results

Four classes derived from descending hierarchical analysis were established through analysis by Alceste 4.5. The classes found were Consumption of Alcohol; Motivation; Forces of Influence and Control; and Consumption consequences.

In addition to these four classes, a fifth one was identified in the students' testimonies and portrays their vision in relation to young people's behavior regarding the consumption of psychoactive substances to the future. This class was named Prevention and Control Perspectives.

Discussion

Classes 1: Consumption of Alcohol

The consumption of alcoholic beverages was reported by the students as a common and advanced habit that permeates adolescent's universe. The drinking *binge* habit became evident as most of young people admitted that they not drink moderately, and this is becoming a habit among adolescents and young adult groups as something socially tolerated. They have noticed and reported an availability of alcoholic beverages "*everywhere today*", (re)affirming that this is really a usual and accepted practice among young people:

"It's here and today there's everywhere and it's advancing... and most teenagers drink".

"There is a lot, but it's not always moderated".

A study with young students has showed that the risk behavior of higher occurrence is regarding the consumption of psychoactive substances, among them alcoholic beverages (Carlini-Cotrim, 2000). It's disturbing the interviewees' speech as they talk about alcohol consumption as something "advanced" and common among them, as the growth and development process and the transformations by which they go through are also results of the social context in which they are inserted in, something that might make them consider this habit not as common, underestimating the risk inherent to it. The prevalence of binge drinking was related to high and was associated with low socioeconomic status and alcohol consumption by the best friend (Paiva, 2015). They have also pointed out the consumption places, the easiness to purchase and the most consumed drinks, highlighting distilled beverages mixed with soft drinks and juices, which it's worrying considering their high alcohol content, especially vodka, mentioned as one of the major drinks consumed by this public. It gets our attention the behavior, attitude of acceptance and the valuation of alcoholic beverage as source of pleasure, sometimes described as "fuel" to festivity and pleasure being a feeling present in many speeches as:

"In most parties there must be beer, there must be some alcoholic beverage, without drinks the party is dull, not fun".

"What the students drink the most is beer, vodka, "pinga", a mix of ice and vodka and "guaraná". They buy vodka because it's cheaper, mix it with juice. They drink it pure too".

The overvaluation of alcoholic beverage shown by the students regarding the impossibility of distracting themselves among their peers without alcohol is an attitude that increases exposure to vulnerabilities in a specific period of adolescence, in which they consider themselves to be invulnerable and indestructible, with the need to try new things and challenge the danger (Knobel, 1992). The same behavior in relation to alcohol consumption was observed in a study with adolescent students in Spain which associates alcohol consumption to the Mediterranean culture leisure shared between friends and family, civic and religious festivities and others (Jimenez, 2009). This seems to justify the permissivity observed in the interviewees' speeches as they related the alcohol as a major element in the festive atmosphere.

Despite the existence of the Law prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages to people less than 18 years old in Brazil (1996), accessibility was reported by the group. Paradoxically, it's noticed that the students demonstrate illegality knowledge and criticized how easy it is to buy alcoholic beverages to people less than 18 years old (minors), despite the critic; they admitted having an important role in regard to the consumption and the purchase of alcoholic beverages in several places:

"It's easy to buy even if you're underage, everybody buys it, everybody sells it, what they want is to sell".

"There isn't supervision, they don't want to know about the law, they just want the money, and they even sell to kids".

"It's easily sold in the supermarket; the guys buy a little vodka to mix with soft drinks or juice".

Studies carried out in other places in Brazil have confirmed these statements about the easiness of buying alcoholic beverages in commercial establishments even being under 18 years old (Vieira, 2007; Romano, 2007).

The results of this study as well as the others prove that alcoholic beverages are fully available to minors. It warns to the fact that the easy access can become a contributing factor to the consumption, once it's evident the lack of rigor in the Law's application.

The group highlighted the media's power that influences and encourages the consumption of alcoholic beverages by young people with regular appeals through advertisements with cheerful places, beautiful and happy people conveying a message of power and conquest linked to alcohol consumption:

"The best TV commercials are beer commercials; alcohol is always linked to fun, beautiful people and sports. If the media had another posture, but big alcoholic beverages companies are very powerful and the media is not going against these companies, the media is very attached to these big companies".

When the media's posture was questioned, it's noticed a critic to alcoholic beverage commercials, especially the ones about beer. This perception and positioning of the students is important, considering that studies warn to the daily information that teenagers and children have through the media, inadequate to their needs or disproportionate to their development stages, which may influence incorporation of ethical, moral and sexual concepts in a simplified and trivialized way. Regarding this topic, a research (Ellickson, 2005) has shown that exposition and attractiveness of alcoholic beverages are related to a much bigger expectation of future consumption and with a greater and earlier consumption, especially among teenagers and young adults. There is a positive relation between appreciation, exposition and alcohol consumption among adolescents. The alcohol use also could expose these adolescents to other drugs. The practice of binge drinking among adolescents was associated with marijuana use, as well as cocaine and inhalants (Raposo, 2016).

Classes 2: Motivation

The motive for the consumption of alcoholic beverages has been referred to as acceptance criteria to entering a particular or specific group. They've spoken of drinks as a facilitator to interpersonal relationships explaining that they drink to be confident to reach out to others, to talk and relate to people.

"What motivates young people to drink is to have courage; I'm a very quiet person".

"A lot of people isn't accepted in a group, but if they drink they are going to be accepted in the group".

"I drink to be confident to talk, to have conversations with people, dialogues".

They also highlight the gender issue, claiming that boys use alcohol as a source of inspiration or courage to approach a girl.

"To reaching out a girl, depending on the person, he doesn't have courage to talk to a girl, so he drinks a little to have courage".

This confirms the trend among teenagers' groups that constitutes the syndrome of normal adolescence, which is in some ways important for structuring the adult identity, however, to use alcohol as a linking strategy may also have serious consequences in different levels.

In Brazil, studies have indicated that alcohol consumption is related to group behavior adopted by teenagers (De Micheli, 2002; Souza, 2010). International researches have also shown the same. Among students of Mexico City who had high alcohol consumption, one of the main expectations for consumption was alcohol as facilitator for group interaction (Mora-Rios, 2001). Alcohol consumption was also mentioned correlated positively and meaningful with consumption by family members and friends (Villarreal-González, 2010). Another statement that calls our attention is the exhibitionism attitude reported by some teenagers indicating characteristics of this phase of life mainly related to the search of establishing an identity in the adult world. An ambiguity attitude is observed, despite not liking to drink, they buy it and show off consuming it as something positive. In this case, to show off alcohol consumption seems to grant a grown up and powerful status:

"There are also a lot of people who drinks to show off, who doesn't even like to drink, but they buy it and keep showing themselves off. Even when the drink is over, they keep showing themselves off".

There's a sense of freedom provided by alcohol consumption that fills the youthful ideals when teenagers admit pleasure by the feeling caused by alcohol referring to it as "*drinking for pleasure*", and yet it alerts for the risk of increasing consumption in pursuit for greater pleasures.

"If you drink, you'll feel lighter, and you'll drink more each time because the feeling is good".

Another important result is in respect to their choices in relation to drinking. If, on one hand, there's the group's pressure, on the other hand they highlight free will and the ability of self-policing regarding consumption limit for recreation, suggesting a potential to work with this audience.

The teenagers give clues of possible strategies to prevent and control the situation. They call the responsibility to themselves when talk about freedom in choosing whatever they want it or not. We noticed that the students take responsibility for their pleasure for alcohol consumption; however, they denied excessive consumption highlighting the limit aspect:

"If the person wants to go, that person goes, but if that person doesn't want to go, that person doesn't go".

"There are people who know their limit. I'll go to have fun, I know my limit, when I get to my limit I stop, but other people don't, they think that as they don't have anything else to do they'll drink".

Other studies indicate that teenagers sometimes draw the responsibility of their actions to themselves to take hold in the society as an adult (Knobel, 1992). Another study has also shown approach statements in relation to alcohol, many assumed like drinking "socially", in a learning demonstration of expression habit in social spaces and distance in relation to consumption of other drugs believed to be illegal (Ferreira, 2007).

"To know my limit" spoken by the students is related to *"know how to drink"* by pleasure. The expression *"know how to drink"* implies: not mixing alcoholic beverages; not emptying the cup too fast; not losing one's sense (among several explanations: to know when to stop); being firm when saying you don't want more; always eating something when drinking (Ferreira, 2007).

To the Brazilian Ministry of Health, information about *"knowing how to drink with responsibility and the consequences about the inappropriate use of alcohol"* are still not enough and they don't cover the high-risk population for consumption, adolescents and young adults (Brasil, 2004). For the interviewees, the purchase and sale of psychoactive substances is common not only in communities where they live but in different locations of the city. They know about this "market" and the easiness in acquiring such substances:

"The drinks are cheaper, drugs are more expensive".

"Drugs in this town everybody buys any time they want, they know where to buy, there are everywhere, everywhere you go you find them, I go to the corner and I can find them there. I go out to go to a bar and there's there too".

It's observed that the students attach greater accessibility to alcoholic beverages as the prices. They have reported that *"drug is more expensive"*, demonstrating knowledge about who acquires this *"product"*, the period of day, market places and values. It calls our attention how easy it's to access drugs as they mentioned *"there's everywhere, I go to the corner and there's there"*, showing that to them the sale of illegal drugs is banal, something common that is part of their everyday lives. These announcements are worrying, considering this everyday environment as locus enabler that exacerbates the conditions for drug use, making young people target to the harassment of drug dealers.

These reports confirm what described in a different study that highlights the availability and presence of drugs in the community where they live as facilitators of use, since the excess of supply helps the access (De Micheli, 2002; Muza, 2002).

Classes 3: Forces of Influence and Control

The meaning expressed in the students' report shows an ambiguity of family influence on alcohol consumption. They demonstrated a "family" valuation as both an authority able to protect them as to encourage them to consume by prescribing the model in the family environment. It's interesting to verify that the students recognize the family's importance, what's coherent with the literature regarding the family's organization as a factor of protection/vulnerability to the use/abuse of psychoactive substances (Pereira, 2011).

"The base is a good family structure"

"The non family structure is the main one"

Researches indicate that the lack of parental support, parents' drug use, negative attitudes, inability to control their children are some factors that may favor the use of alcohol and other drugs by teenagers. Not living with the parents, unfavorable family and personal situations, lack of relationship with parents and having divorced parents also have significant association with the beginning or continuation of consumption of alcohol and other drugs (Oliveira, 2005; Hernandez, 2007).

Internationally, a study carried out among students from Monterrey, Mexico has shown a meaningful correlation between family history of alcohol consumption, consumption by friends and consumption by students (Hernandez, 2007).

As for measures to control and prevent, students believe there are still possibilities and have given suggestions like co-participating in the actions. They also included themselves in the proposals of prevention and control in an acknowledgment of the problem presenting them as part of the solution:

"To have more laws, to extend those that already exist", "to work with the students, with young people".

"More discussions, more clarification".

"Because you see a pack of cigarettes, for example, now it's even getting better, nowadays the pack of cigarettes' label and a tiny thin stripe says that it's forbidden to underage people".

What was presented by the interviewees corroborates with the claim that teenagers have a creative potential and an ability to act as agent of change in the context which they live (Jimenez, 2009; Muza, 2002). Therefore, one of the best ways to work and have a relationship with teenagers is to be able to hear them and let them express their opinions. It's important to think about this potential as a possible strategy putting them as leading hole to health actions targeting this audience.

The gender issue when they said that boys drink more than girls was also reported, but they declared there are a great number of girls who drink. They still highlighted the difference in the treatment given by the father in relation to sons and daughters:

"There's a bigger number of girls who don't drink, but it's still low the number of the ones who don't drink".

"The boys drink more. It starts with the parents, my father gives much more freedom to my brother and I can't drink. Boys can drink, girls can't".

We can see by these comments some concern with the number of girls who have a consumption posture, (re)affirming a social culture of higher acceptance of alcohol consumption by males. This increase of consumption by girls was pointed out in a population-based study (Strauch, 2009), which results have shown not to be a meaningful difference prevalence of such abuse among the genders, that may show a tendency to an equalization among both sex in relation to alcohol consumption.

Regarding the father's difference in treatment, the interviewees' comments pointed out a greater concern about this topic and the consumption of alcohol by the daughter, what can be interpreted as remains of a *machismo* culture in the children's education in relation to alcohol consumption. To consume alcoholic beverages can be interpreted as a masculinity symbol, being common for fathers to offer drinks to little boys and show how proud they are with that behavior (Zagury, 2003). That confirms alcohol consumption as a deeply-rooted cultural habit related to males (González, 2010).

Classes 4: Consumption consequences

In the students' perception, alcohol consumption may have different levels of harmful consequences from episodes of negative personal exposition to tragedies like death.

"My cousin is in her twenties, when she drinks she remembers nothing on the other day. But people take pictures, make videos, and when she wakes up and sees what she's done, she regrets and says that she'll never do that again. But she does it again on the other day because she likes it."

"I know a case, the brother of a friend of mine. He was drunk and left in his motorcycle and he did Russian roulette, crossed a red light on an avenue and crashed into a car and died. He did that because he was drunk".

It highlights that reported cases by the students were always about "other" people, they denied having suffering any consequences because of abuse of alcohol or other drugs, despite assuming alcohol consumption and having tried, in some cases, other drugs. It was noticed that the students recognize the negative consequences about alcohol consumption. The mentioned consequences by the participants are in harmony with other authors. In Brazil, a study has revealed a higher number of aggressions, fights and accidents between students who consume alcohol (Carlini-Cotrim, 2000). Among fatal car accidents, 50% of the victims between 10 and 19 years old and 66.7% of the victims between 20 and 29 had positive blood alcohol presence, with significant and higher frequency among the youngest (Abreu, 2010).

The students reported the use of alcohol were twice as likely to have severe accidents and almost three times more to have moderate accidents (Moreira, 2008). Although students can also make a moral assessment of the excessive use of alcohol with results show that drinking and driving, aggression and theft are considered the least acceptable behaviors (Cruz, 2009).

In 2001 in the United States, the alcohol consumption was responsible for about 75.000 deaths and 2,3 million potential life years were lost (about 30 life years lost for each death)⁽³⁵⁾. In Europe, the main cause of young people's death in 1999 was assigned to external causes related to alcohol consumption (WHO, 2001). In Brazil, 15.8% of students who have suffered some sort of accident reported having been drunk before the event, confirming the relationship between alcohol consumption and occurrence of diseases to health (Carlini-Cotrim, 2000).

Classes 5: Preventing and Controlling Perspectives

Students' perspectives about preventing and controlling the consumption of psychoactive substances by scholars. It was stated the following in relation to the students' expectations about possible measures to prevent alcohol consumption:

"Nothing can be done, I think nothing would work, even the father allows, who will forbid? Public health and educational politics aren't worthy, it's not worthy, and any effort it's done won't decrease almost anything".

"But I think nobody will stop. Everything they'll try to do to change this concept won't work because it's already established among young people today".

The comments from private school students were a lot different from those given by public school students:

"Talking, just like you're doing, going to schools, talking about why forbidding isn't the solution, to have lectures, talking to parents, an open conversation between parents and children, dialoguing, sitting and talking, explaining".

The analysis from the statements above reflects about a point of view of private schools students that alcohol consumption is already part of a culture without possibilities of change, showing a lack of hope. This posture can be interpreted as an acceptance to alcohol consumption in festivities situations in family and social environments, portraying the reality lived by these students and (re)affirming the cultural acceptance of alcohol consumption by the society, and/or financial availability to purchase. It can also demonstrate the lack of perception or the non valuation of negative consequences of this habit (Gil-Lacruz, 2010).

The position shown by private school teenagers about alcohol consumption may favor the adoption of risk behaviors which contribute to a bigger exposure to situations that result in morbidity or mortality of this audience. The consumption of alcoholic beverages, noticed as something natural at this period of life, may follow the teenager and favor dependence in adulthood with significant consequences in the individual, familiar and social levels, as the early beginning of alcohol consumption can predict the development of an abusive consume behavior and/or dependence in adulthood (Pitkänen, 2005).

On the other hand, public school students believe in the possibility of preventive measures and they made relevant suggestions supported by literature. Despite the omens of context which these students are inserted in, they demonstrated hope and positive expectations regarding the adolescents and young adults' behavior and they included themselves to promote health and prevent the consumption of alcohol and other psychoactive substances. This difference of perspective noticed in the two groups can be related to the socioeconomic level of both classes (Gil-Lacruz, 2010). Other studies have been demonstrated differences in profile of drugs or alcohol use among private and public schools (Faria-Filho, 2014; Paiva, 2015).

The schools need to assume their function in promote the prevention of drugs use. Their role had been described in literature (Silva, 2016). However actions devoted to teacher needs be implemented once teachers understand they are in disadvantage regarding the State, family and society responsibilities on the matter (Curdier, 2016) and sometimes the social representations were characterized by a stigmatizing vision of adolescence and alcohol (Araldi, 2012). Know the feelings of the students can be an initial step in this change.

Conclusion

The interviewees' reports show a perception the students have about the consumption of psychoactive substances. Such perceptions are linked to their experiences with people and domestic and social locations where consumption happens. This consumption happens as a result of reasons arising from the interaction among peers, the need to assert them in the adult world and to establish a relationship with others and the opposite sex. Although such consumption can be notice as something negative, harmful and with potentially serious consequences, the motivations seem to overcome the fear of risks known and reported by the group.

Family structure is recognized as essential to control and encourage the consumption of such substances, being highlighted as key element in this ambiguity process of control and encouragement. It is clear that teenagers have a perception of family support as something able to interfere in their attitude, behavior and relationship with drugs, especially alcohol.

In a general analysis of the panorama above, some suggestions may be relevant. In what refers the control, it's suggested a severity with the law's applicability which forbids the purchase and sale of alcoholic beverages by and for minors, it should be thought as a part of strategies to control and prevent the use or abuse of alcoholic beverages by minors.

We evidenced the need to discuss the reformulation and compliance of laws regarding the publicity and sale of alcoholic products as well as a way to broadcast such advertisements, including an effective participation of teenagers and young adults as members on discussion.

Family, reported by the teenagers as key element, must be included in the public policies to prevention and control as an active part of the process as well as a multisetorial inclusion as schools, health professionals, media, government, church and the whole society.

Study's Limitation

The fact that this study was carried out in a school environment excludes students who have dropped out of school especially because the consumption of alcohol or psychoactive substances was a limitation. The study was carried out in a single city which limits the results generalization for Brazil. It wasn't possible to use any kind of randomly selection of private schools once among all invited schools only one decided to participate impairing some discussions and generalizations.

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