

## VULNERABILITY TO ALCOHOL USE: A STUDY WITH ADOLESCENTS FROM THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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This study aimed to analyze the vulnerability to alcohol use through the discourses of adolescent students attending public and private schools in the city of João Pessoa, PB. The sample consisted of 160 adolescents with ages ranging from 13 to 18 years. The survey employed the group discussions methodology and the analysis of contents employed the Thematic Categorical Analysis. The discourses showed the motivational determinants for alcohol use; thus, confirming the early onset, the relationship between alcohol and cigarettes; the knowledge regarding the consequences of consumption, and the possible causes of the increased intake among adolescents. It also highlighted how the intervention provided by health professionals, parents, educators, and other social agents is essential to their development and psychosocial adjustments.

Descriptors: Adolescent; Alcoholism; Social Vulnerability.

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## **VULNERABILIDADE AO USO DO ÁLCOOL: UM ESTUDO COM ADOLESCENTES DAS REDES PÚBLICA E PRIVADA DE ENSINO**

Este estudo teve por objetivo analisar a vulnerabilidade ao uso do álcool por meio dos discursos de adolescentes escolares das redes pública e privada da cidade de João Pessoa, Paraíba. Participaram 160 adolescentes com idade variando de 13 a 18 anos. Utilizou-se como instrumento grupos de discussão, analisando os conteúdos pela Análise Categorical Temática. Verificaram-se nos discursos os determinantes motivacionais para o uso do álcool; a confirmação da iniciação precoce; a relação entre álcool e cigarro; o conhecimento acerca das consequências do consumo e as possíveis causas do aumento da ingestão entre as adolescentes. Constatou-se a importância da atuação dos profissionais de saúde, dos pais, educadores e demais agentes sociais na mediação do desenvolvimento e ajuste psicossocial desses.

Descritores: Adolescente; Alcoolismo; Vulnerabilidade Social.

## **VULNERABILIDAD AL USO DEL ALCOHOL: UN ESTUDIO CON ADOLESCENTES DE LAS REDES PÚBLICA Y PRIVADA DE ENSEÑANZA**

Este estudio tuvo por objetivo analizar la vulnerabilidad al uso del alcohol a través de los discursos de adolescentes escolares de las redes pública y privada de la ciudad de João Pessoa, PB. Participaron 160 adolescentes con edades variando de 13 a 18 años. Se utilizó como instrumento grupos de discusión, analizando los contenidos a través del Análisis Categorical Temática. Se verificó en los discursos los determinantes motivacionales para el uso del alcohol; la confirmación de la iniciación precoz; la relación entre alcohol y cigarrillo; el conocimiento acerca de las consecuencias del consumo; y las posibles causas del aumento de la ingestión entre las adolescentes. Se constató la importancia de la actuación de los profesionales de salud, de los padres, educadores y demás agentes sociales en la mediación del desarrollo y ajuste psicossocial de éstos.

Descriptorios: Adolescente; Alcoholismo; Vulnerabilidad Social.

### **Introduction**

Epidemiological studies have demonstrated that the alcohol consumption is a major public health concern, particularly in relation to adolescents because the intake of alcohol usually starts at this stage, along with that the psychosocial consequences arising from this behavior<sup>(1-3)</sup>. The understanding of the adolescence should take into account the multiple emerging aspects historically constructed and, therefore, it cannot be seen only as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, but for the historicity and the cultural aspects embedded in it<sup>(4)</sup>.

In this context, it has been observed that the intake of psychotropic drugs among youths, especially alcohol is starting earlier than ever. Research conducted by the Brazilian Center for the Study of Psychotropic Drugs (CEBRID) indicates that, among all the evaluated substances, alcohol had the earliest median age onset of consumption, which is just over 12 years of age<sup>(2)</sup>. In turn, the earlier the experimentation, the worse the consequences and the greater the risk of developing alcohol abuse and dependence<sup>(5)</sup>, it may be also associated with

the possibility of a number of social and health problems, including traffic accidents, violence, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, myocardial infarction, among others<sup>(6)</sup>.

Given the above, there is a significant concern about the vulnerability of the adolescents regarding the alcohol use. The vulnerability model, in which the individual is seen as the active agent of his own health, is formed by three interdependent plans of determination, which understand personal behavior or individual vulnerability; social context or social vulnerability, and the program to combat illness or programmatic vulnerability. The three components prioritize analysis and multidimensional interventions considering that people are not, in themselves, vulnerable but may be vulnerable to some illnesses, under certain conditions, at different periods in their lives<sup>(7)</sup>.

Thus, the concept of vulnerability, now incorporated into the health theoretical and methodological repertoire, can be understood as “the movement to consider the chance of exposing people to illness as a result of a number of aspects not only individually, but also collectively [and] contextual”<sup>(8)</sup>. This approach can increase performance in health and generate reflections, which allow the formulation of health policies based on the needs of the community.

Alcohol consumption by adolescents may also contribute to other vulnerabilities, in addition to the health risks, resulting from the drinking, with the school being one of the means of integration and socialization. This study aimed to analyze the vulnerability to alcohol use through the discourses of adolescent students from the public and private school systems in the city of João Pessoa - Paraíba.

## Methodology

This was a cross-sectional, exploratory, and descriptive study with qualitative approach. Including a group of 160 students, between the ages of 13 and 18 enrolled in the 9th grade and high schools from the public and private systems in the city of João Pessoa - PB. The study adopted the following inclusion criteria: to participate in a preliminary quantitative study on health risk behavior, involving 1400 adolescents of both sexes, consent to participate in the research, and included in the age requirement of the research (adolescence).

It employed the discussion group methodology. This qualitative research technique enables the understanding of the formation of different perceptions and attitudes with regards to a fact, practice, product, or services, relying on the interactions between its participants to collect data from the topics supplied by the researcher (group moderator)<sup>(9)</sup>. Each group was composed of 10 adolescents who, within the inclusion criteria, were chosen in a random and non-probabilistic way, with equal distribution of grades and gender in each school system, totaling eight groups for each system.

In the groups, the adolescents were informed of the objectives of the research, the non-effect on school performance, as well as the confidentiality of the

information provided (used for research purposes only). The oral presentation of a discussion guide emphasized the focus of the debate. This script was drawn from the quantitative results obtained in previous research, and it dealt with legal drugs. The debate was conducted through the semi-directed orientation of two researchers who performed the stimuli in the form of requests for comments or descriptions of a certain experience. The discussions were tape recorded with the permission of the participants, for the subsequent transcription and data analysis. Each meeting lasted, on average, one hour and thirty minutes.

The following steps were taken for the development of this project: obtain approval by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Paraíba; contacts with the state and local departments of education and the principals at the selected schools. The creation of the discussion guide (items) from the results obtained in the previous step; preliminary training of the team working with the discussion groups, return to school with the results and invite students to participate in the discussion groups, conduction of discussion groups in schools, transcribing and analyzing data, and dissemination of results.

The analysis of emerging content of the groups employed the Thematic Categorical Analysis technique processed according to Figueiredo<sup>(9)</sup>.

Table 1 - Stages of the Categorical Analysis Technique

Phases	Steps
FIRST PHASE (Individual Sessions)	A. Initial Reading
	B. Marking
	C. Cut
	D. First Junction*
	E. Notation
	F. Organization and First Synthesis
Second Junction†	
SECOND PHASE (Total Content)	A. Initial Reading
	H. Organization
	I. Notation
	J. Final Article

\* Contents related to various categories, in the same subject or the same group

† Contents related to various subjects or several groups in the same category

The study considered the ethical issues pertaining to research involving human subjects<sup>(10)</sup>, and received the approval by the Ethics Committee of the Center for Health Sciences - UFPB.

## Results

The data analysis resulted in 6 categories and 18 sub-categories, namely: 1. Motivations for alcohol consumption, with the subcategories: *1.1 Naturalization; 1.2 Search of pleasure; 1.3 Draw attention/showoff; 1.4 Loss of inhibition; 1.5 Curiosity; 1.6 Escape problems; 1.7 Family influence; 1.8 Peer pressure; 1.9 Media Influence; 1:10 Access* 2. Introduction to alcohol; 3. Relationship between alcohol and cigarette; 4. Consequences of alcohol consumption; 5. Causes of increased alcohol consumption

among adolescents, with six sub-categories: 5.1 *Space of conquest*; 5.2 *Peer pressure*; 5.3 *Opposite sex influence*; 5.4 *To match/surpass men*; 5.5 *Loss of inhibition*; 5.6 *To feel older*; and finally, 6. Avoidance of alcohol consumption, with subcategories: 6.1 *Dialogue with parents*; 6.2 *Adolescent Awareness*. The discourses were classified according to gender (F = female and M = male) and school type (PR = private and PU = public).

As for the first category, Motivations for alcohol consumption, in the *Naturalization* subcategory, the adolescents reported that one of the reasons leading the youth to the alcohol consumption it is the belief that it is a normal thing to do as demonstrated in the following discourse: *Because they think, it is normal to drink* (F/PR). However, this subcategory was absent in the discourse from the public school students. Now, the *Search of pleasure* subcategory was present in the conversations of the students in both school systems, which they declared to be one of the motivations for drinking, the pleasure from it, and it is linked to having a lot fun, especially when consumed at parties, which is ascertained in the following: (...) *alcohol brings pleasure to many people, to have more fun, to loosen up* (F/PU).

Furthermore, the *Draw attention/show off*, referring to the third subcategory is another reason why adolescents consume alcohol. This situation was observed in the expression used in both public and private schools: *Just to show off* (F/PU); *Likes to boast* (M/PR). There were some differences in the discourses of the male participants, as the motivation behind the reasons that lead the youth to show off when under the influence of alcohol, the public school students mentioned the interest in the opposite sex: *To show off for the girls. That girl over there, I'm going to show off for her, I'll drink* (...) (M/PU). Conversely, in the private schools, the issues of popularity and superiority reinforced the exhibitionism through the drinking, as demonstrated by: *They think by doing that they are showing self-confidence that others will look up to them* (F/PR).

The *Loss of inhibition* is another reason mentioned as a motivator for the intake of alcoholic beverages. In this case, the alcohol is contemplated as the means to "loosen up", to lose inhibition, and is present in the conversations of the participants from both types of school, as in: *There are many people who use alcohol, trying to loosen up, let's say that, in the various parties, there are boys who drink to get rid of the shyness* (...) (M/PU).

According to the adolescents, from both public and private schools, the *Curiosity* is another propellant to the alcohol consumption. In this subcategory, the youths attributed it to the juvenile phase, and experiments with the unknown: *And there's also that thing that teenagers want to experience, today is increasingly earlier* (...) (F/PR). For the subcategory *Escape problems*, participants mentioned the drinking as a way to escape from reality, especially with regard to family problems: *The majorities who have some family problem drink to escape reality* (F/PR). It is noteworthy that some discourses emerging from the public school system do not see the escape from problems as a reason to encourage the youth to drink, which is a reason for adults, but not for them. *Drinking to forget the bad stuff is more for the grownups*. (F/PR).

The following subcategory was named *Peer pressure*. It achieved the highest number of discourses (46) within the category Motivations for alcohol consumption category, being equally distributed between the sexes and the school systems. This motivation was considered crucial at the onset and the continuing vulnerability to alcohol use as it can be seen in the discourses: (...) *is the peer pressure, because if the friend asks you to experiment and you say you don't want to, then he says that you are weak, then you take it as a challenge; you either do it or you are weak and square* (F/PR). It was followed by the *Family Influence* subcategory, which obtaining the second largest number of discourses (24), equally distributed between the sexes and school systems. The participants determined the importance of the family model in the development of positive and negative expectations: *If the father always teaches us to do good, what is right, then we see him drinking, smoking, so ah, we will do it too, make the same mistake!* (F/PU).

*Media Influence* was the following subcategory within the Motivations for alcohol consumption category. It was only present in the discourse of the private school students, in which the participants stated that the motivation for drinking is the desire to follow the fad imposed by the media. The discourse below shows: *You also have the issue of the media, the advertisements, shows a person drinking with many beautiful women, skinny, and such on his side. Then he might think that if he drinks the same stuff, he can also have a beautiful woman, sexy by his side* (F/PR). The following subcategory was named *Access*. Here, the adolescents from both school systems and both sexes showed this factor as one of the facilitating causes for the vulnerability to alcohol use, confirmed in the discourse: *There is an easy access, that's why the adolescents drink* (M/PU).

The second category, called *Initiation to alcohol* had a more in depth discussion in the private system, with eight discourses while, in the public system, there was only one. Most students said that today the adolescents begin drinking before they reach the age of 14, around the ages of 10 and 11 as demonstrated by the following discourse: (...) *so you see, 10 years old kids already smoking, drinking* (M/PR). The third emerging category was the *Relationship between alcohol and cigarettes*, accentuated by both sexes; however, it had a bigger presence in the discourses from the public school students. They indicated that many adolescents start smoking because of the alcohol effect, legitimized at the following discourse: *There are a whole lot of youths who smoke, drink, and it is from the alcohol effects that they start to smoke. Every person who normally drinks always craves the smoking*. (M/PU).

The fourth category consisted of the *Consequences of the alcohol consumption* and emerged only in the discourses of the participants from the private system. According to these, the consequences of the consumption involve the inconveniences caused by the ingestion of alcoholic beverages, such as social isolation and health hazards, ascertained in the discourse: *Because the person will be kind of run down, drinking, smoking. First will be ruined inside, and then in the outside. And people will start to avoid them because they do not like being around an alcoholic person*. (F/PR).

The fifth category was called Causes of the increased consumption of alcohol by adolescents and refers to the comparison of alcohol consumption between girls and boys. It can be observed that the first subcategory, *Space conquest*, related to the emancipation of women in society, most discourses are from adolescents in private schools, and from both sexes. As an example, we have the following discourse: *I think it's great, because women are looking for more space* (M/PR).

The second category was called *Peer pressure*, being mentioned only by male adolescents in public schools as it can be seen in: *Because of the peer pressure* (M/PU). The third subcategory was also related to the influence, but unlike the previous one, it is related to dating relationships, designated *Opposite sex influence*. Girls from both school systems made most of the discourses. As an example, we have the following discourse: *(...) then men influence them to drink and loosen up* (M/PR).

Also from the category Causes of the increased alcohol consumption by adolescents stemmed the fourth subcategory, *Match/Surpass the men*, which comprised the highest number of discourses (twelve) and are linked to gender differences, specifically, to the competition. The discourses in this subcategory are distributed equally between the sexes and school systems. Example: *Because nowadays, women want to be more than men because men have been so much more than us, so we have to turn this situation around have to show that we are equal (...). So we have to show that women will drink more* (F/PR).

The fifth category, *Inhibition*, reveals that the increasing use of alcohol by adolescents is motivated by the quest to block the inhibitions; however, only the females in private schools mentioned it: *I think it's more a question of shyness. I've heard that girls who are shy, start drinking, then I do not know, they start to loosen up* (F/PR). Finally, the sixth subcategory, *to feel older*, was mentioned only by the adolescents in private schools. As an example, we have: *And the young girls want to look older* (M/PR).

The sixth and final category refers to possible factors that could prevent the alcohol consumption by the adolescents, so it was named Avoiding alcohol consumption. It was divided into two subcategories: *6.1 Dialogue with parents*; *6.2 Adolescent Awareness*. We emphasize that this category consists only of discourses that emerged from the private schools. The first subcategory, *Dialogue with parents*, was cited by both sexes: *If the father also knows how to raise the kid, because we know that the father will not spend all day on the adolescent's back, but in his spare time, he has to try to talk with the kid* (F/PR). The second subcategory, *Teen Awareness*, consists of discourses that demonstrate accountability by the adolescents themselves. It was mentioned by both sexes from the private school systems. Example: *But it also depends on the conscience of the youth. My dad drinks and I do not drink* (M/PU).

## Discussion

The naturalization attributed to the alcoholic beverage is perceived as a risk factor to which the youths are exposed; present within some cultural contexts<sup>(11)</sup>, e.g., Beer and

cachaça as part of certain Brazilian festivals, which is exposed and publicized in the media<sup>(12)</sup>. This condition is associated, in part, to the pursuit of pleasure that the youths attach to drinking, in a way that the desired fun at parties depends on the alcohol consumption. When discussing cultural myths and symbols used in advertisements for alcohol beverages, it is clear that the media effectively influences the consumption. Furthermore, the relationship between what is socially shared and the limited law enforcement, contribute to an environment conducive to the experimentation with alcohol and the early exposure to alcohol abuse<sup>(13)</sup>. Moreover, there is a social and programmatic vulnerability in the cultural context itself.

Although Article 81 of the Child and Adolescent Statute (ECA)<sup>(14)</sup> prohibits the sale of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes and the like to children under 18 years old, there is an ease of access to alcohol, with no control over the sale of these products. Adolescents are experimenting with alcohol at earlier ages than ever before, and the more premature is this onset, the greater the risk of serious consequences in the future, which can reach the whole of their biopsychosocial domain.

Extraversion and sociability expectations are some of the motivators for the alcohol use among the youths. These expectations are reinforced as they promote greater social interaction, a positive evaluation of themselves, as well as the achievement of new experiences<sup>(11-12)</sup>, present in the *Loss of inhibition, Draw attention/show off, and Curiosity*.

Although these factors are consistent with the adverse conditions present in the juvenile stage<sup>(15)</sup>. They can result in increased individual vulnerability, such as traffic accidents, unwanted pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases since the feelings of invulnerability striking at this stage of development are intensified by the alcohol use; thus, causing the adolescents to believe that they can take risks without suffering the consequences<sup>(16)</sup>.

The peer pressure was noted as the greatest motivator for the vulnerability to alcohol use. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the peer pressure, as well as to avoid exclusion, and not to be criticized or insulted, lead the adolescent to the use of alcoholic beverages. Regarding the family influence, mentioned in the *Motivations for alcohol consumption*, and on the *Avoidance of alcohol consumption*, the quality of the relationship between parents and adolescents has a significant impact on the health risk behaviors of these<sup>(17)</sup>. This could also be observed in the *Escape problems* subcategory, in which the youths have mentioned the difficulties in parental relationships as a motivating factor.

The adolescents revealed in their discourses the possible causes for the increase in alcohol consumption among girls<sup>(18-20)</sup>. The *Space conquest* and *Match/Surpass men* subcategories stand out in relation to the consumption among adolescents, by differing from the possible causes for the alcohol consumption related to the adolescents in general. This consumption may be linked to the financial independence and the possibility that currently the adolescents have more freedom to attend places, where the alcohol consumption occurs that were previously restricted to men, which shows the female emancipation in the social achievements<sup>(21)</sup>.

## Final Considerations

The discourses show the vulnerability of the adolescents when they are being subjected to alcohol consumption. The motivations leading to drinking are related to the expectations and beliefs that the youths have in relation to the intake of alcohol, such as socialization, the pleasure afforded, the increase in self-esteem, and the new experiences, as well as the influence of the authority models parents and caregivers, the media exposure, and the peer groups.

There were some particularities regarding the types of school. Naturalization and media influence were highlighted in the private schools, which may be related to greater access that these students have to the different media outlets, and how that content is being transmitted. As for the increase in alcohol consumption among adolescents, the private school students mentioned shyness, the feeling of being older, and the space conquest as reasons, in addition to those mentioned by both types of school. Now, the adolescents from the public schools mentioned the peer pressure and with it the prevalence of personal and social issues. Although the participants from the public school systems have mentioned issues dealing with the avoidance of the alcohol consumption, and the ones from the private systems regarding the consequences of consumption, both categories refer to the knowledge of individual vulnerabilities to the alcohol use among the adolescents since the students admit to inherent accountability to themselves.

By their own admissions, it is considered that the impact of alcohol use on their lives transcends schools boundaries, inserting itself in the different social classes; thus, demonstrating the need for parental involvement, either through dialogue, affectivity or disciplinary practices, as agents in the formation of the young. Furthermore, the health professionals, educators, marketing operators, and other social agents may serve as mediators of the decisions taken by the adolescents, developing prevention policies including the development and psychosocial adjustment, by doing so educate the youths facing the vulnerabilities and risks involving alcohol.

As for the limitations of the study, the main one referred to the hindrance offered by some schools regarding the conduction of group discussions, claiming that it would disrupt the schedule of classes. Equivocally, the schools believed that the subjects approached in the discussion groups would arouse the interest of the students to the alcohol use. Finally, there was a noticeable inhibition, by some of the participants, to verbally express their practices regarding the use of alcohol, especially in front of their classmates, whom they have daily interactions.

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