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## “Feeling tipsy”

### A project for preventing alcohol-related behaviours

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#### Abstract

Addressing the issue of prevention from alcohol abuse, the realized project was not built with reference to a typical medical or sanitary perspective on health, but mainly adopting the perspective of developmental and socio-cultural psychology. We were primarily interested in knowing the meanings adolescents attach to their prevailing experiences and their representations of drinking alcohol. We also assumed that adolescents use alcohol to test themselves and to challenge themselves into possible identities. So we designed the survey as an action research, collecting information from participants to the project and discussing the data with them, both on their alcohol representations and their identities conceptions. We will show the main results, in terms of the collected data.

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#### 1. Introduction

Prevention means a set of measures done upstream, in advance, which can prevent the onset of a disorder or deviant behaviour. Activities aimed at prevention can be classified according to three levels of action:

- *primary prevention*, or public health intervention, with social, economic and educational measures designed to prevent an event harmful to health (e.g. substance use or abuse) that may occur;
- *secondary-prevention*, or interventions for early detection, care and treatment not performed under a clinical treatment, but contextualized in different settings (e.g. group-situations, road situations), with attention to a specific target;
- *tertiary prevention*, or rehabilitative social and economic work, aimed at preventing the worsening of adverse events in an individual that has been previously subjected to therapeutic interventions and education.

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Intervention strategies that can be implemented as part of the prevention activities described above are distinguished by the interlocutor to whom they are addressed. It is also possible to distinguish between *direct* prevention carried out directly on/with youth, and prevention to be held *indirectly* through adult -educators, teachers, etc.

Our research can be considered as a secondary prevention. It also can be considered as a direct form of prevention, as we mainly involved directly the participants. It is part of a broader four-year project (2006-2010) which involved about 2500 students from different types of schools, in a coastal town of central Italy. The purpose was to activate the participants in analyzing both the meanings they assign to drinking alcohol, and their representations of self-image.

## 2. Finality

The project is an action research (Lewin, 1972), because it primarily relies on a compilation of information gathered from the participants, to build with them the prevailing meanings they attach to their experiences. Our aim was also to provide an opportunity to recognize their self image and self concept (Harter 2003) both in the aspects of the direct image and the image reflected by significant others (Cooley, 1902). In addition we tried to explore the meanings attributed to alcohol and its consumption. Self-knowledge, in fact, constitutes a protective factor in the process of identity construction, which is the developmental task in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). The more a person is able to know and recognize his/her positive and negative aspects in his/her own identity, the more this kind of distinction helps to have realistic expectations about themselves, to know in which way to face failures, to choose path of life suited to their desires and capacities. Self-knowledge can be also considered as an ability to deal with interpersonal relationships, both with adults and peers.

## 3. The Sample

During the last three years around 2000 students of the third middle school class and the early grades of high school were involved. As the research is still ongoing, the data currently processed refer to only a part of the larger data set, collected from several kinds of secondary school (e.g.: lyceums, technical and vocational schools) in order to ensure teenagers from different socio-cultural background would participate.

## 4. The adopted devices

The adopted instruments are: conceptual maps, questionnaires, self-reports and focus groups. Semantic or conceptual maps (Novak & Gowin, 1984) are schematic ways of representing ideas, information, associations linked to a particular concept used as main reference. We asked participants to complete the map in an entirely anonymous way. At the top of the sheet the assignment is presented "Write whatever comes to your mind thinking of the word...". Then, in the central the word "alcohol" is written. Compilation of the conceptual map aims to highlight the ideas about alcohol that boys and girls own, without other previous information. A questionnaire composed of open questions and multiple choice questions was also used, aiming to explore the meanings that young people attach to the sentence "to feel happy or tipsy after consuming alcohol means...".

The Self-report questionnaire (Zuczkowski, 1976) was used with the students that attended the secondary school, consisting of fifteen open questions posed on five separate sheets: the first one includes a single question "When you think about yourself: how do you think you are?". The other four pages contain four questions each, according to the following structure: "In your opinion, what do your familiars - friends - teachers - classmates – think about you?" (Nicolini, 1999; Nicolini & Bompreszi 2003). While in the first sheet a direct reflection on herself/himself is required, the other questions invite the student to think about the reflected image (Cooley, 1902) keeping in consideration *others* who function as significant figures (Crittenden, 1994; Crittenden 1999) for adolescents (Palmonari, 1997).

The focus groups aim to offer an opportunity to enrich the construction of self-image for the participants, being able to experiment within group and, specifically, in the group class, as people who receive and provide feedback on their characteristics. Discussing in group the given answers in the conceptual maps, in the questionnaires and in the

self-presentations has given the participants a chance to share both positive and negative experiences. The discussion also facilitated the possibility to highlight common issues and resources, participating in the search for strategies (Zammuner, 2003) and in the achievement of solutions.

## 5. Actions

The actions were performed in 3 sessions, lasting one hour each. With middle school students the main activity was the building of the conceptual map. The emerging data were discussed with the participants, in order to share meanings and promote reflections.

With high school students, the data were collected through self report questionnaires, then they discussed together the main outlined topics. The adopted method in all the planned activities was interactive, aimed to match the youths' perspective and their self representations. The results were used to highlight what kind of qualities teenagers refer to in their identity building process. Significant differences emerged depending on whether to be called into question are family, friends, teachers, or classmates (Nicolini, Bompreszi & Cherubini, 2009).

## 6. Data Treatment

### 6.1. The middle school students

The terms derived from the conceptual maps' and the open questions questionnaires' analysis were categorized, aggregating data into four different categories: physical, cognitive, emotional-affective and social. In the physical category words such as *vomiting, sick, head bursts, it starts to spin* were considered. The cognitive category is constituted by words linked to perceptual and thinking processes such as *does not think much before doing things, feels confused and bewildered, he does not remember anything*. The emotional-affective category included references to the moods and sensations, such as *joy, elation, feeling lighter*. In the social category words and expressions were merged such as *friends, companionship, laughter, joking, get along well, parties*.

### 6.2. The high school students

The self-presentation protocols were treated as linguistic texts and entered into a word processor (Word). They were then studied through a software, TaLTaC2 ([www.taltac.it](http://www.taltac.it)), utilising a lexicostatistics approach, which enables both semantic and content analysis. In addition, the computation of occurrences in the body of the text is also available.

## 7. Analysis and results

### 7.1 The middle school students

With regards to the data gathered from the middle school students, we found out that they mainly linked the word *change* to the use of alcohol, both in the conceptual map and following the way in which they described the meaning of 'feeling tipsy' and 'feel off your head' status. The *change* is conjugated as *physical, cognitive, affective* and *social*.

*Physical change* refers to the changes quoted as bodily sensations (e.g.: bursting head, feel sick). The participants seem to agree about the fact that physical changes produced by alcohol are dangerous (e.g.: deaths, car accidents, you just can not control yourself, he becomes dangerous for you and for others). The students often associated alcohol abuse to risky behaviours. Anyway the physical change seems to be one of the most easily accessible way to achieve some form of experimentation and exploration of self. The desire to transgress comes to light, as well as the desire to test themselves, to know and better understand their bodies.

*Cognitive change* refers to those expressions concerning mental and thinking processes involved in alcohol-related disorders. Several times references to the changes that occur in reasoning processes after one or more drinks appear in the students' works (e.g.: you are not aware of what you do or understand, does not understand anything,

makes confusion inside his head). The adolescents seem to like overstepping the boundaries of rational thinking in order to feel free.

*Affective-emotional change* refers to the answers quoting feelings and emotions related to drinking (e.g.: feeling happy, feeling in heaven, it's something that feels good and that you would like to do it again). In these cases, alcohol can be used to feel enjoyable. To use alcohol seems to be an easy way to escape from sadness or other feelings considered as negative.

*Social change* can be organized according to two classes of meaning: the first refers to actions directed toward others or things (e.g.: stealing, to have accidents, rapes, damaging property); the second refers to the interpretations of the reasons why young people use alcohol (e.g.: needs help, he feels above the others, he believes he is a god, she feels great and wants to make you jealous). Referring to the first kind of social changes, youths seem to be aware of the damages that alcohol can cause. Anyway it is a short time awareness. Long terms damages such as diseases or permanent consequences of accidents are never cited. The second category of social changes seem to be linked to the need of being accepted and acknowledged, above all by peers.

## 7.2 The high school students

Through the self reports analysis, we found 4986 different graphic elements (words) and 51452 occurrences in the corpus, with an average frequency of 10.32. A selection of graphs detected by the program was made, with the aim to analyze only those words the adolescents used to express qualities related to themselves. In the selected corpus we considered only the graphic forms with more than 10 occurrences, reducing the total occurrences (6295) to 112 graphic forms (average frequency 56,20). We then considered only the graphic forms with a frequency over 10%. In the following graph we illustrate the list coming from the elaboration of the whole texts, that is to say that the adjectives here calculated can be present in any part of the questionnaire (Fig. 1).

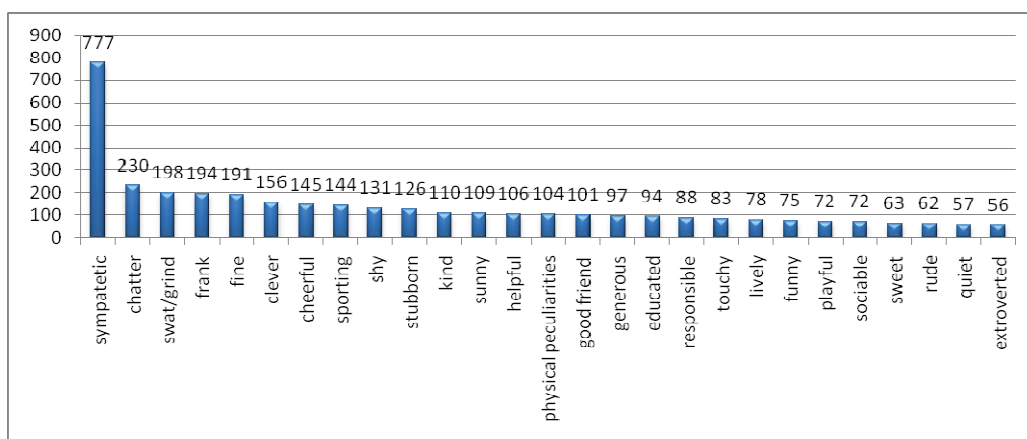


Figure 1. Most frequent adjectives referred by the adolescents to themselves

The adjective *sympathetic* clearly appears as the most used, with 777 occurrences (more than 3 times than any other). The meaning of *sympathetic* is linked to the kind of social relationship and can show the necessity of adolescents to be in touch with others. It also can reveal the need of adolescents to be accepted. It is even more true if we keep into consideration the fact that the classes in which we collected data are in their first year, that is to say that boys and girls don't yet know each other. The other adjectives are frequently connected to social dimensions (chatter, frank, cheerful, shy and so on). Little quotations appear to cognitive (sweet, fine, clever) and bodily qualities (sporting, physical attributes), even less to moral aspects (responsible).

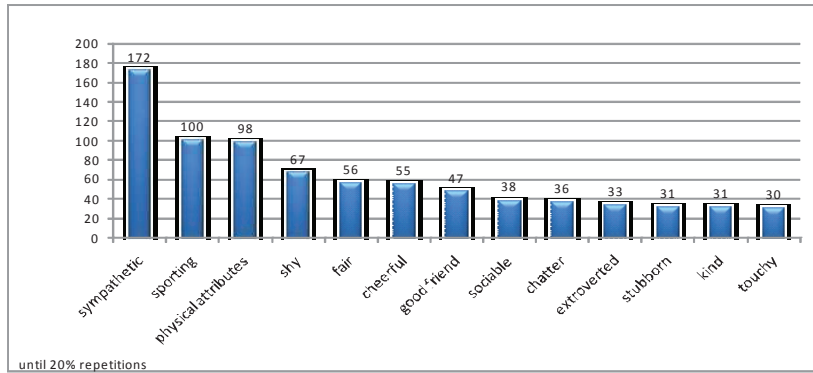


Figure 2. (%) Most frequent adjectives for the self-image

Referring to the students' answers given to the first question "About you: how do you think you are?" (Fig. 2) we found out that the adjective *sympathetic* is the more present (172). It reveals how much to be in relation with others and to receive social positive reception is considered important by adolescents. The other main qualities are also linked to social aspect (shy, fair, cheerful, sociable). 198 occurrences are related to physical aspects and 101 to the affective dimension of the relationship (good friend). As the participants to the survey are boys and girls 14/15 years old, the presence of physical dimensions can be considered still typical. On the contrary it is important to underline the complete lack of cognitive and moral qualities. It can suggest that they are not so meaningful qualities for adolescents.

About the second part of the questionnaire, dedicated to the looking glass self, we start to deal with relatives (Fig. 3). The main qualities expressed are moral (214) and cognitive (146). It is usual to think about moral qualities as requested in the context of family. Unusual is the presence of cognitive dimensions, perhaps due to the influence of the scholastic situation in which the questionnaires were collected. It can be possible that the participants activated a special attention to the scholastic aspects as far as parents pay attention to their learning outcomes and marks.

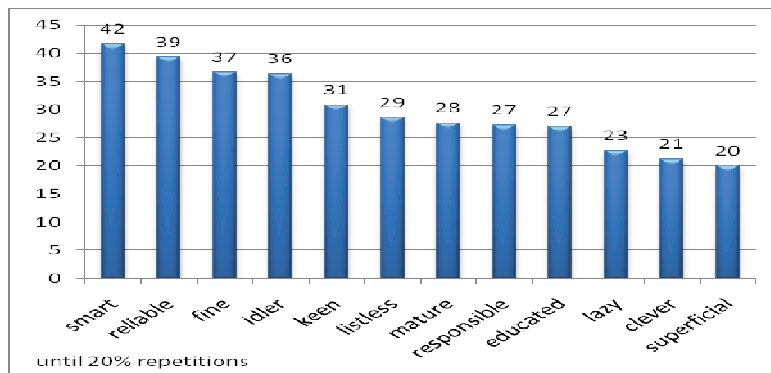


Figure 3. (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (relatives)

The qualities related to teachers (Fig. 4) are mainly linked to social aspects (150), that is to say bored, messy, educated, calm. It can be interpreted as if the teacher largely interacts with adolescents in order to manage social relationship in the class. Only 43 occurrences are linked to cognitive traits. The results show the opposite of what can be expected in a scholastic context, in which the focus should be on learning processes. Obviously it is the students' point of view, in any case it represents an important signal about the kind of representation they possess of scholastic system. It can also be a significant information about the way the students perceive the context and consequently orient their behaviours when they are at school.

The main quality linked to friends (Fig. 5) is *cool*; apart from the adjective *reliable*, that seems to suggest a moral dimension (at least in the Italian language), and the expression *good friend* that seems to allude to an affective component, the other adjectives appear wholly related to the social level of the relation.

With regard to the reflected image by schoolmates (Fig. 6), this is the only case in which adolescents present themselves in a negative way (*nasty*). Also *bored* is a negative psychological status, but it can be considered as provoked by others (in this case by teachers – see figure 4). In any case school seems to be a complex micro system, within which adolescents learn about disciplines but overall about themselves.

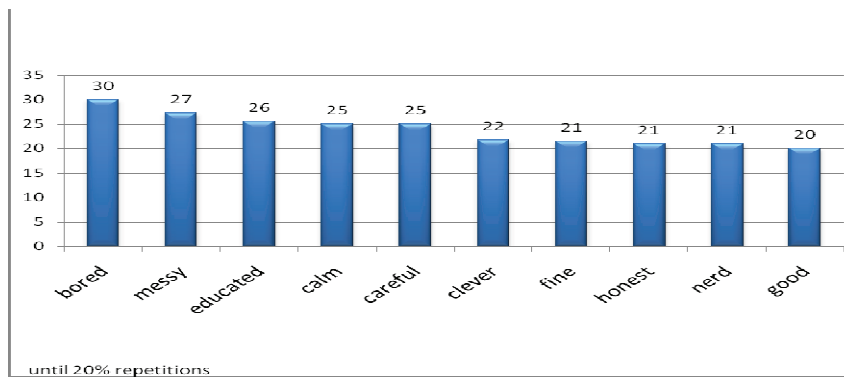


Figure 4. (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (teachers)

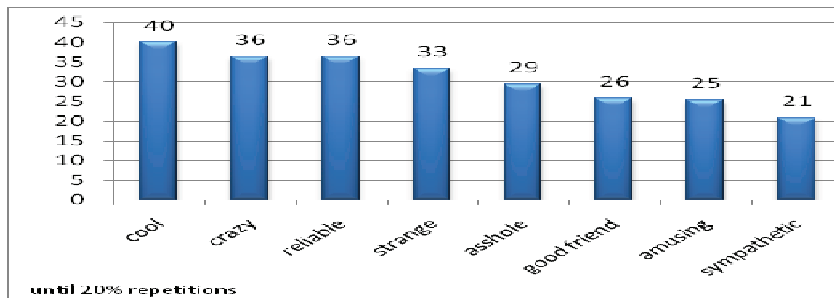


Figure 5. (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (friends)

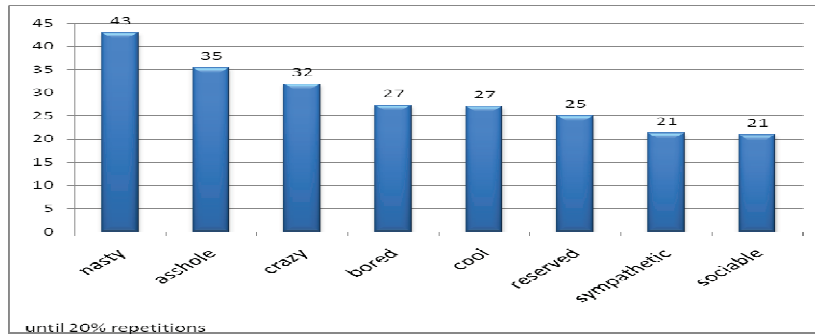


Figure 6. (%) Most frequent adjectives for the looking glass self (schoolmates)

#### 4. Conclusions

Our aim was to understand the meanings attributed by young people to alcohol drinking and to identity characteristics. Through the used instruments we could collect useful data in order to better understand the phenomenon. Our youths seem to use alcohol in order to act on their image status, revealing a strict link between alcohol use (and abuse) and adolescents' task of identity building process. This constitutes a good indication in order to better organize prevention's project. As all the collected data were presented to the participants and discussed with them in order to gather together their ideas, we are now conducting a further phase of the work, with the aim to collate and compare the data collected after the discussions. The analysis is now ongoing.

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