How Environments and Persons Combine to Influence Problem Drinking

**Current Research Issues**

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**Abstract.** In this chapter, a brief review of existing empirical research on environmental correlates of problem drinking is presented. The review shows that environmental factors do relate to the prevalence of drinking problems and also to the way drinking problems are expressed. In the major section of the chapter, however, it is shown that our present knowledge of how environmental and personal factors combine to influence problem drinking is quite limited, perhaps because almost all of the existing empirical research has attempted to account for problem drinking by means of individual variables alone, environmental variables alone, or in terms of linear combinations of individual and environmental variables. It is shown that alternative approaches offer more promise for understanding how individual and environmental factors combine to influence problem drinking; these approaches are aimed at accounting for problem drinking in terms of the mutual interdependence between persons and their environments. Within two hypothetical sets of data, a number of conceptual and methodological issues, problems, and features of these kinds of interactional or transactional approaches are then illustrated. It is shown that although such approaches offer a promise of greater understanding, they also present a set of interrelated problems which run the gamut from measurement, statistical analysis, experimental design, and sampling issues to paradigm issues lying close to the realm of the philosophy of science.

1. **Introduction**

Other chapters in this section of the present volume present very thoughtful and careful reviews of existing empirical research bearing on the question of whether genetic factors have been shown to be associated with alcohol consumption behaviors. As a counterpoint to these chapters, the editors of this volume felt that a chapter representing an environmental perspective on the development of alcoholism would provide a valuable measure of balance to this section. In this chapter, I first try to meet this felt need by providing a brief review of some of the major environmental correlates of problem drink-
ing. This review highlights existing empirical research bearing on the question, "What environmental factors are associated with problem drinking among adolescents and among adults?" However, I endeavor to make short work of this task for reasons that should become abundantly evident below.

Following the brief review, I attempt to show why maintaining separate individual (including genetic) and environmental perspectives is surely not the most useful route to understanding the development of real-life behaviors such as problem drinking or alcoholism. By "separate perspectives," I am referring here not only to attempts to account for problem drinking/alcoholism by means of either individual variables alone or environmental variables alone, but also to attempts to account for these kinds of behaviors in terms of additive linear combinations of individual and environmental variables. Such strategies are aimed at one or another of the following two questions. (1) Which type of factor, hereditary or environmental, is responsible for problem drinking? (2) How much of the variance in problem drinking is attributable to inherited factors and how much is attributable to environmental factors?

In this later section of the chapter, I identify and illustrate some of the desirable features—conceptual and methodological features—of cross-sectional and developmental research aimed at accounting for problem drinking/alcoholism in terms of the mutual interdependence between persons and their environments. It is seen that the prosecution of these kinds of interactional or transactional research strategies requires us to develop creative solutions for a number of interrelated issues. Although these issues present complex challenges, these approaches are aimed at providing answers to what I believe is a much more fruitful question: How do individual and environmental influences combine in the development of problem drinking?

2. Environmental Correlates of Adolescent Problem Drinking

One major national survey of adolescent drinking practices has furnished a basis for estimating the rate of adolescent problem drinking.\textsuperscript{1,2} This survey of more than 13,000 junior and senior high school students' drinking practices, attitudes, and correlates was based on a probability sample of all students in grades 7 through 12 in the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia. The data included measures of drinking frequency, quantities drunk, negative consequences of drinking, indices of problem drinking, measures of other drug use, general deviant behavior, and a variety of psychosocial measures.\textsuperscript{3,4} Rachal et al.\textsuperscript{2} classified 27.8% of their sample as problem drinkers, based on a criterion of having been drunk four or more times during the prior year or reporting drinking-related negative consequences in two or more life situations (with friends, regarding school, with dates, with police, or while driving).

Donovan and Jessor\textsuperscript{3} examined these data using three alternative definitions of problem drinking: (1) 19% were classified as problem drinkers based on a criterion of having been drunk at least six times during the prior year