

Disinhibition/drinking differences between African-American and European-American youth

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Compared to European American adolescents, African American adolescents are more likely to abstain from alcohol, drink less frequently, and engage in less heavy drinking when they do drink. Very little research has examined racial differences in disinhibition. A study of changes in impulsivity and sensation seeking from childhood into adolescence has found that European American youth have higher levels of sensation seeking while African American youth have higher levels of impulsivity.

Results will be published in the October 2012 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"Very little research has examined why African American adolescents drink less [alcohol](#) than European American adolescents," said Sarah L. Pedersen, assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh and corresponding author for the study.

"However, studies have shown that the African American culture may hold more conservative views about drinking compared to the majority culture in the United States. For example, African American adolescents may feel that their parents and friends disapprove of their drinking more than their European American counterparts."

Gregory Smith, university research professor and director of clinical

training at the University of Kentucky, agreed. "African American culture appears to be more conservative regarding alcohol use than European American culture; in part, this may be due to the typically high level of religiosity among African American families," he said. "There are many important findings in this study, in particular, race differences in personality that appear to contribute to drinking behavior in youth is quite important."

Pedersen and her colleagues analyzed data collected on 447 African American (n = 117) and European American (n = 330) adolescents who were eight and 10 years old at the initial assessment. Assessments on the children and their mothers were conducted seven times over a 7.5-year period as part of the Tween to Teen Project.

"Our study highlights the different developmental course of two related constructs: [impulsivity](#) and [sensation](#)," said Pedersen. "It is really interesting to see that [sensation seeking](#) increased over time while impulsivity, from the mothers' reports, decreased. In general, European Americans had [higher levels](#) of sensation seeking at every assessment point, and they also had sharper increases in sensation seeking over time compared to African Americans. On the other hand, African Americans had higher levels of impulsivity – both child- and mother-reported – at the majority of assessments, but the rate of change did not differ across groups over time."

"This is the first study to examine racial differences across time, using a longitudinal design," added Smith. "The use of a longitudinal design is absolutely crucial, so this study provides an important advance. From this work, we know that sensation seeking levels as young as age eight, and increases in sensation seeking over time, predicted later drinking. We also know this was much more true for European American youth than for African American youth. There was no way to know this from prior research."

"Until recently, alcohol researchers would focus primarily on 'impulsivity' as a general trait-like construct," observed Pedersen. "This study looks at two aspects of disinhibition and found that it is not necessarily just mean level of the construct but individual differences in change in these personality constructs that is related to alcohol use. Also, very little research has examined [racial differences](#) in disinhibited personality characteristics, which have been widely studied as predictors of alcohol use in predominantly European American samples."

Both Pedersen and Smith saw a number of ways in which these findings might be applied.

"Concerning possible prevention or treatment, it may be the case that sensation seeking-focused interventions are more appropriate for European American children than African American children," said Smith. "In other words, professionals should] develop more specific interventions, some focusing on sensation seeking-based risk and others focusing on other aspects of risk. Each child should be assessed for his or her specific risk profile. For clinicians and researchers, there is a need to learn more about why African American youth tend to drink less but have more alcohol-related problems. For parents, if your child is high in sensation seeking, in that they seem always to be looking for new thrills and risks, then provide safe, socially appropriate ways for them to meet these needs."

Pedersen agreed with the need for parental involvement. "Given the increases in sensation seeking that we saw from childhood to adolescence, particularly for the European American children, parents or treatment providers could focus on talking to their children early in adolescence about risk taking and safety precautions," she said. "Also, while impulsivity decreased over time on average, those individuals with increasing levels of impulsivity or static levels were more likely to use alcohol frequently and this could highlight a subset of [adolescents](#) who

could benefit from early intervention."

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