

# Personal Fableness and Perception of Risk Behaviors among Adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a crucial period where one tends to identify who they are as an individual. However, as a teenager is struggling to find his/her place in this world, it is also a time where they are prone to engaging in risk behaviors, which tend to have an extreme psychological impact. The objective was to explore the experiences of an adolescent who engages in risk behaviors and to understand their level of personal fables. The study was a qualitative design with content analysis with semi-structured interviews of ten male adolescents aged 16-18 years. The major findings of the study indicated that adolescent's pattern of thinking revolves around the fact that they are invincible and invulnerable. Furthermore, adolescents are aware of the risks they are putting themselves through and how in the process they are hurting others. The implications of the study are to conduct more life skill programs in schools; greater awareness has to be created on the impact and harmful effects of such behaviors.

**Keywords:** *Adolescents, risk behaviors, perceptions.*

## INTRODUCTION

“This will never happen to me” is perhaps the most prevalent response from the majority of adolescent's when cautioned about consequences of risky behaviors. Adolescence is a period in one's life where they are recalcitrant to accepting criticism and advice from adults outside their peer group. Most adolescents widely ignore the risks and engage in unsafe behaviors. Empirical findings suggest adolescents' affiliation with friends who engage in risky behavior is a strong predictor of adolescents' health-risk behavior, at least for substance use and violent behaviors<sup>17, 14</sup>.

Adolescence is a time of great change for young people when physical changes are happening at an accelerated rate<sup>19</sup>. Physical changes do not just mark adolescence; young people also experience cognitive, social/emotional and interpersonal changes as well.

External factors, such as environment, culture, religion, school and the media influence the youth. Statistics relating to adolescent engagement in risky behaviors indicate adolescents drive faster than adults<sup>13</sup>, have the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases<sup>12</sup>, the highest rates of self-reported drug use, and commit the vast majority of crimes<sup>2, 3</sup>. Risk factors adolescents engage in include individual factors such as low self-esteem, negative peer groups, low school engagement or pursuit of higher educational aspirations<sup>4</sup>. The familial risk factors include poor child-parent communication, low parental monitoring, lack of family support and parents themselves engaging in risk behaviors<sup>14</sup>.

Adolescents perceive themselves as invincible/invulnerable to their actions that might have negative consequences. This thinking to what Elkind rightly defined as Personal fableness is “an adolescent's intense focus on himself or herself as the center of attention is what ultimately gives rise to the belief that one is unique, and in turn, this may give rise to feelings of invulnerability.” Research evidence shows that personal fable levels are high during adolescence and with the association to engaging in risk behaviors<sup>1, 7</sup>. Adolescents

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engage in risk behaviors under the notion that nothing can ever happen to them.

Culture plays an imperative role in behavioral patterns, which needs greater empirical attention. For instance: feeling that one is uniquely different from others (personal fable ideation) may be more characteristic of youth in Western societies, where individualism is typically valued and fostered<sup>4</sup>. Studying this phenomenon from a collectivistic society to understand the risk related behaviors are important. In the fast growing pace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is evident that the availability of drugs is easily accessible in a collectivist society<sup>15</sup>.

The present study aimed to understand the subjective reasoning and differences amongst individuals that lie behind why an adolescent engages in certain behaviors, in spite of knowing their consequences, not attributing it to any theoretical concepts or personality characteristics. Studying this phenomenon from a collectivistic (Indian) society to understand the risk related behaviors are important. The focus has only been on certain risk behavioral characteristics, not taking a cluster of interrelated behaviors into account. This study gave participants an opportunity to talk about their experiences. Exploration of their experiences will allow health workers to introduce better support programs.

### Research questions:

What is an adolescent's perception of risk behaviour?

What are the factors that influence an adolescent's perception of risk behaviour?

## METHOD

The research design is a qualitative using content analysis method for data analysis. The sampling method included convenience and purposive sampling. The sample size consisted of ten male adolescent participants between the age group of 16-18 years of educated high school adolescents, engaging in risk behaviors residing in Bangalore.

### Research Tools

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, as it enabled rapport building, allowed greater flexibility in coverage and probing of novel areas and produced richer data, unlike self-report questionnaires<sup>18</sup>. The

demographic data, screening tools Adolescent Risk Behavior Questionnaire (ARQ) and the New Personal Fable Scale<sup>16</sup> was administered to identify potential participants. Ten boys who were engaged in risk behaviours of more than three on the Adolescent Risk Behavior Questionnaire were selected as participants.

**Semi-structured interview Schedule** was developed to conduct the interviews. The interview revolved around 15 risk behaviors identified with the help various literature reviews. The interview contained ten questions that were developed to elicit the client's subjective perceptions of having engaged in various risk behaviors.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Informed consent and permission to conduct the interview were obtained from the school authorities and students. The demographic data and tools were administered in the first phase followed by the interview in the final meeting. The researcher audio recorded the interview and parallel maintained a reflective journal for memo writing. The researcher recorded the impressions of the interview, the interviewee, duration, and atmosphere of the interview. The participants were thanked for their participation in the study and informed the results would be shared with them later on.

*Content analysis was used to analyze the data collected.* The researcher transcribed and read each transcribe multiple times while simultaneously listening to the respective audio recording to rectify any redundancy or discrepancy. The common themes that emerged after the analysis of all the interviews were discussed in detail along with examples in the form of verbatim responses given by the participants.

**Ethical Considerations:** The informed consent and voluntary participation was ensured. Participants were made to understand there would be no monetary or any form of reward involved. The option of withdrawing from the study whenever they chose was kept open. The data was used only for research purpose. The study did not have any psychological or physiological harm to the subjects. In case of any psychological distress, relevant help was suggested to be obtained by the school counselor. The Department review committee granted the University ethical clearance for student research.

## RESULTS

From the findings of the current study, it can be inferred that adolescents do understand the consequences of risk-taking behaviors. However, they do not seem to integrate their perceptions, to the decision-making process while engaging in such risk behaviors. Adolescents are embodied in nearly every type of risk-taking behavior<sup>3</sup>. Copious human and financial resources are ardent each year to burgeoning programs that target adolescent risk behavior<sup>8</sup>. Below are the themes, generated from the interviews of the ten participants.

**Defining Characteristic of an adolescent:** When the participants were asked about their most defining characteristic that makes them different from other individuals, the majority of the responses revolved around how they are willing to take risks/challenges. Many of them feel they have a high sense of willpower enabling them to be more daring, willing to take risks compared to other people they know. About participants feeling, they are more willing to take risks than others; there is a sense of positivity/negativity to their characteristics.

*"I'm always willing to take risks; I enjoy hanging out with people who don't go to college or school....., I love riding my bike fast once I'm stoned or drunk, I feel I'm always under control". – A 16-year-old adolescent*

**Peer pressure:** Majority of the participants stated that it's not okay to give into peer pressure. The most common reasons being the social circle they are part of engaging in risk behaviors such as smoking marijuana, cigarettes, and consumption of alcohol. Participants state, initially they have just tried it because their friends were doing so, they were curious and wanted to try it out too, despite knowing their friends shouldn't influence them.

*"No you shouldn't give into peer pressure but, I had given in when I first started smoking pot, I felt bad initially, then soon it's you who is peer pressuring someone else to do something."- An 18-year-old adolescent.*

**Influence of media:** The modes of media such as television shows/movies, the majority of the participants stated these mediums influenced them, by seeing famous movie actor's smoke cigarettes/ marijuana and consume alcohol. Furthermore, some participants stated the media has also influenced them in playing pranks such as peeing on a police car or school wall, bursting firecrackers at

their principal's office, rash driving and of alcohol. Six participants stated that media had influenced them.

*" I first thought it was wrong but as friends were doing it, along with media and everything else I thought it's okay its cool for sometime." - An 18-year-old male adolescent*

**Self-perception and reasons to engage risk behaviors:** Participants who engage in risk behaviors feel a high level of guilt, knowing they're doing something risky/harmful, continuing to engage in such behaviors. Adolescents feel guilty that the allowances they receive from their parents are used for buying substances. One participant feels wrong from a religious perspective to engage in risk behaviors. He rationalizes his behavior by stating, he knows it's wrong at the end of the day life gets tough and engaging in risk behaviors helps him escape it all.

However, four out of the ten participants don't feel guilty in engaging in risk behaviors, stating they aren't harming anyone, as they do it in safe environments. Their friends mostly have the particular substance, which they use. Thus they aren't using their parent's money at all. Six out of the ten participants; stated that they do feel bad and guilty in engaging in risk behaviors. However, continuing to do so because as it is a pleasurable act for them. They have lots of fun, knowing their limits and having control over their usage.

*"I feel better when I'm using, I know I'm letting some people down, but I think it's going to be fun for me, I'm always around friends when I do it, so it's fine for me."- An 18-year-old male adolescent*

Adolescents are aware of the negative consequences engaging in risk behaviors. However, they justify themselves, by stating they don't feel guilty about doing something wrong. Expressing they aren't doing harder drugs such as cocaine. Some adolescents state as long as it's just consuming alcohol, smoking marijuana and cigarettes they aren't doing something harmful. Sensation seeking and identity explorations are growth-related characteristics, emboldening adolescents to engage in risky behaviors. On the other hand, in the majority of interactions, adolescents tend to not consider risky behaviors as really risky<sup>13</sup>. Nine out of ten participants stated that risky tasks are enjoyable for them, relieve them from stress, make them more calm/

relaxed, allays them from family issues, schoolwork, self-satisfaction, thrill and excitement to test their limits.

“It gives you another world you can experience, when I smoke up I feel more relaxed when stressed with family or studies, it makes me calmer.” – A 16-year-old male adolescent

Peer pressure and media influence play a significant role, in risk behavior's among adolescents. Results of the study indicated peer influence plays an imperative role explaining risky behavior during adolescence. In the present study, the majority of the participants believed they were mentally strong, have somehow been victims of peer pressure. Research<sup>7, 8</sup> has validated peer pressure and its relevance to social status among adolescents. Elkind's (1976) concept of personal fable can be seen, in the present study. The way adolescents perceive themselves compared to others when interviewed on this domain. Personal fable gives rise to a sense of invulnerability and specialty with a propensity for behavioral risk-taking<sup>7</sup>. Findings from this study corroborate to what Elkind (1967) suggests. Results of the current study can also be exhibited in other research studies/literature review acquiring similar results. Longitudinal, experimental and cross-sectional studies, postulate robust evidence that, youth are more vulnerable to view smoking favorably and to become smokers; as a result of exposure to smoking in the media. Media brings billions of impersonations of glamorized smoking and consumption of alcohol to millions of youths through TV, movies, video games, music, the Internet and advertisement in general<sup>5</sup>.

Some adolescents feel guilty about spending their parent's money on drugs or alcohol. However, many of them state their parents won't even find out or have any notion they engage in such behaviors. Few adolescents perceive themselves to be mentally strong individuals; they can control themselves. However, with risk-taking behaviors, they don't feel mentally strong. A study indicated, adolescents with risk-taking did experience emotions of being fearful, anxious, distressed, saddened, content and thrilled as a consequence<sup>6</sup>. However, they rationalize their behavior by stating that they feel very superior, unique and significant as a consequence of risk-taking<sup>11, 13</sup>.

The dimension of sensation seeking and risk personality contributed significantly to patterns of

adolescent risk behavior, distinctively to alcohol consumption, delinquency and a much minimal extent to drinking/driving, risky driving, and drug consumption<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, invulnerability dimension of personal fable also contributed significantly to patterns of risk-taking behavior. Hence, with the present study, although adolescents are aware of the harmful consequences attached to the risk behavior they engage in, many of them feel engaging in behaviors such as consumption of alcohol, smoking, drinking and smoking pot, for example, takes away life's troubles they face every day. Adolescents rationalize their behaviors expressing, how stressful their life has been and engaging in these risk behaviors gives them pleasure/relieves them from stress life has to offer. The influence of peer pressure and the developmental stage that cause adolescents to unambiguously focus on the exhilaration, which accentuated the proliferation of adrenaline<sup>13</sup>. The results further indicated adolescents continue to engage in risks, giving rise to the feeling of knowing it all; and risks alleviate boredom making life more enjoyable.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATION

The major findings of the study indicated an adolescent's pattern of thinking revolves around the fact that they are invincible or invulnerable. An adolescent's high personal fable dimensions of invulnerability and personal uniqueness, causes them to further engage in risk behaviors. However, guilt does play an imperative role when they're testing willpower in engaging in such risk behaviors. Factors such as media and peer pressure further deteriorate their willpower to say “NO.” Adolescents rationalize their behaviors, despite knowing the consequences. Adolescents want to experience sensations, enjoyment, and color in their daily routine, experiencing risk themselves<sup>3</sup>. Hence the high functioning of their personal fable continually reinforces them to engage in such behaviors, as well as external factors contributing to it. The implications of the study are to formulate adolescents to reflect upon their actions cognitively from a different perspective. The imperative implication is to encompass supplementary life skill programs in schools. Furthermore; teachers, school counsellors, and parents have to be more involved in such programmes.

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