

# Theories of adolescent risk taking



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Adolescence is seen as a period when an individual is unable to competently assess risk. There is a general belief that adolescents believe that they are invulnerable to risk thereby unable to perceive certain behaviors. Because of this, adolescents are adjudged to be less aware of risk. This provides the reason the reason why there are legal limitations on adolescents' right (Bellotti, 1979, Gardner, Scherer & Tester, 1989). On the other hand, some view adolescents as having the capability to making informed and competent decisions as adults (Melton, 1984). This means that some see adolescents as seeing themselves as invulnerable.

This idea is supported by Elkind's theory (1967, 1978). In this theory, Elkind argues that people become cognitively egocentric when they first enter into formal operations. Because of this, adolescents believe that they are unique and special making them immune to certain things. They see themselves as invulnerable to harm. This geocentricism and invulnerability are expected to reduce as the individual moves from middle to late adolescents. But some believe that this theory on geocentricism is not associated with adolescence transition into formal operations, and that it is not limited to adolescence alone (Frankenbreger, 2000, Gray & Hudson, 1984).

In addition, research has not found any positive correlation between geocentricism and perception of invulnerability (Dolcini et al., 1989). Social researches on adolescence have not been helpful in resolving the debate between adolescents' perception of invulnerability to risk and adolescents' competence. There are numerous inconsistent studies on this issue. There are factors that may be responsible for these inconsistencies.

According to Millstein and Halpern-Felsher (2002), these inconsistencies maybe due to the methods used to measure risk perception. Some researchers used probabilistic assessment, that is, the chance that an outcome will occur (Quadrel et al., 1993, Gochman & Saucier, 1982) while other researchers like Finn and Brown (1981, Cohn, Macfarlane et al. (1995) examined adolescents' perception about harm, that is “ the amount of harm that could be caused(p. 401). This has the ability to cause disparity between the studies and also questions the validity of these findings. Another cause of this disparity is failure of researchers to consider behavioral experiences across ages and control for it. While some of the earlier studies that focused on adolescents' age group and those that compared adolescents and adults found a significant difference in awareness of and consideration of risks (Ambuel & Rappaport, 1992, Chassin et al., 2001), some others found few differences. One of the studies that did not support the idea of adolescents' invulnerability is the one conducted by Millster and Halpern-Felsher (2002). In their studies, they took into account the above identified problems in studying adolescents and young adults risk perception. While other researchers used participants' parents to measure comparison between adolescents and adults risk perception, these researchers use unrelated childless adult to eliminate this problem. Their reason for using unmarried young childless adults was because those with children may have a greater awareness of risk because of their positions as parents compared to childless and non parent/unmarried young adults. This is because using adolescent participants' parents may create problem of non independence between the groups. They used 433 adolescents and 144 young adults between the ages of 20 & 30 as comparison group from racially diverse population and from

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geographically and demographically similar area. They tried to find out age differences in risk judgement and if adolescents risk judgment differ from those of adults, and if vulnerability perceptions to harm are more prevailed in adolescents than adults.

In the result, they found a significant difference between young adults' and adolescents' risk judgment. Also, there was a significant age group differences between older adolescents and younger adolescents. Older adolescents assessed probability of negative outcome to be lower than younger adolescents. The study challenges the general belief that due to adolescents' developmental status, they view themselves as invulnerable as well as underestimate risk. Adolescents don't see themselves as invulnerable, though they may fail to perceive specific risk related to a specific behavior, and at the same time, may over estimate the benefit of such behavior. Even after controlling for behavioral experiences, younger adolescents perception of risk was greater than older adolescents, and adolescents perceived greater risk than young adults. Because younger adolescents have been taught that engaging in risky behavior results in significant risk, they are likely to believe it (Millstein & Helperin-Felsher, 2001). But with increased exposure to peer risk behavior coupled with maturation, adolescents are able to observe that not all risky behaviors have a negative outcome. The researchers observed that the participants over estimated risk. Young people already have a sense of heightened vulnerability and that continuous emphasis on the negative outcome of risk might be counterproductive, in that it might conflict with adolescents' own experiences as they might realize that not all risky behaviors result in

negative outcome. The result of this study is in contrast with the popular belief that adolescents perceive risk less than adults do and that adolescents also see themselves as invulnerable.

Another research that is consistent with the above finding is the work done by Baumgartner and Peter (2010). They investigated adolescents' and adults' perception of internet risk, especially online sexual risk. Previous studies on online risks found that adolescents are vulnerable (Mitchell, Finkellor & Wolak, 2001, 2007b, Yabarra, Mitchell, Finkellor, & Wolak, 2007). These findings are based on the assumption that adolescents are massive internet users. There is scientific/research evidence to prove that adolescents are more vulnerable online than adults and that adolescents reported a very negative feeling such as being afraid from online sexual solicitation (Mitchell et al., 2001). Some reasons for this unwanted online sexual solicitation include the fact that due to adolescents' massive developmental changes at his stage, the need to relate to others increases thereby making them vulnerable to unwanted sexual solicitation (Singelman & Rider, 2003). On the other hand, adults may not be keen on interacting with strangers, thereby decreasing the risk of unwanted sexual solicitation.

Another reason for this vulnerability is that adolescents spend more time online and this may increase their chances of receiving unwanted online sexual solicitation (Jones & Fox, 2009).

The empirical evidence to support that adolescents take greater risk than adults have been inconsistent. The difference between adults and adolescents risk perception may be because adolescents today are more

familiar with internet and newer social networks compared to adults. In their study of 1765 Dutch adolescents and 1026 Dutch adults, done through online survey, Baumgartner and Peter (2010) investigated age and gender differences in unwanted online sexual solicitation. The result showed that female adolescents and young female adults are at the greatest risk of this online harassment. This may be because of the specific online activities that they are involved in, or may be because they are just the targets of these perpetrators. A reason for this may be because these groups of people use the internet as a means of communication rather than for entertainment, and the use of internet for chatting increases the chance of unwanted sexual solicitation. Because one of the challenges during adolescence is identity formation, these adolescents may use the internet to relate to others by self disclosure or to share intimate details (Mazur & Kozarian, 2010, Calvert, 2002). They also found that young girls find this undesirable and may be more emotionally and cognitively vulnerable to such messages compared to older female adult. This means that adolescent girls feel vulnerable with such behaviors, this is in contrast to the general belief that adolescents perceive some behaviors as risky. An emerging adult may cope better in such situation, but an inexperienced adolescent may be more vulnerable and may need protection than adults. There was also evidence of increased online risk for older adolescents male and adults compared to younger adolescents. This may be because as one gets older, one partakes in more risky behavior compared to when one was younger.

This is evidence against the notion of adolescents' invulnerability. Another reason for this increased online sexual risk found among older adolescents

and adults may be because sexual interest does not decline with age or after adolescence, and sexuality being an important part of adults, engaging in online sexual risk may help satisfy these sexual needs.

Though these evidence that adolescents do not engage in more risk than adults does not mean or suggest that adolescents' behaviors should be neglected. Risk behaviors are interpreted differently by adolescents and adults (Parsons et al., 1997). It is seen as a normal thing when adults give out private information about themselves online based on the assumption that adults can handle any negative consequence from such behavior unlike adolescents, such behaviors may be frowned at because any negative outcome may be detrimental and may affect their normal development.

In addition, although risk may have potential negative outcome, it also serves an important cause in adolescent development (Jessor, 1992, Igra & Irwin, 1996) as it helps adolescents develop autonomy and maturity. It also helps in coping with anxiety and frustration. Online sexual risk may also help adolescents in developing their sexual identity. Hence, online sexual risk behavior should not be viewed as detrimental to adolescents, but it could also serve to facilitate healthy development. This study shows that adolescents, especially younger adolescents are risk aware, and that the fear of adults about adolescents' online sexual risk behaviors is unfounded.

A study by Haase and Silbereisen (2011) linked the effect of negative affect on adolescents' risk perception. This study is in contrast to the above studies that adolescents have a higher risk perception than adults. And that this depends on the affect. That perception depends on our mood or emotion

either positive or negative. Other studies have linked positive affect to lower risk perception (Johnson & Tversky, 1983). This means that adolescents who are emotionally open are influenced by this. The Haase and Silbereisen (2011) study examined the effect of positive affect on adolescents' and adults' risk perception. The study involved the use of audio-visual method to induce emotion. Research has shown that negative emotion leads to a higher risk taking, because the individual tries to overcome the bad mood through engaging in activities that are rewarding in short run and can potentially have harmful effect on the long run (Tice, Bratslavsky & Baumeister, 2001). But from the result of the study, they found that when an individual is in a good mood, he is less likely to perceive some risky behaviors like smoking and alcohol drinking as risky. The study also examined the effect of mood across age groups. It was found that positive affect lowers risk perception across age groups, whereas negative affect led to lower risk perception among mid adolescents but did not for early adolescents and young adults. This may be because developmentally, mid adolescents have a high stress vulnerability (Spear, 2000), and a higher risk taking (Steinberg, 2008).

Therefore, it has been shown that affective influences play a big role in adolescents risk taking. When adolescents are in good mood and excited, they tend to indulge in risky behaviors or they may judge some behaviors as risk free. Because previous studies have used questionnaire to assess adolescents' risk taking, using experiment showed that adolescents partake in risk behavior and that this risk taking is influenced by affect either positive or negative. This means that adolescents and adults may be more risk averse when they are faced with situations that do not give rise to great



emotions, and this may not be captured in questionnaire study. This result in conflicting findings on adolescents risk taking, but using experimental design may show the real situation when the adolescents are faced with strong emotions. Feelings may alter risk perception.