



PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Personality and Individual Differences 43 (2007) 1199-1209

www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

The relationship of neuroticism and urgency to negative consequences of alcohol use in women with bulimic symptoms

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Received 11 September 2006; received in revised form 5 March 2007; accepted 16 March 2007 Available online 25 May 2007

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to test hypotheses regarding *why* eating disordered college women report more frequent negative consequences of alcohol use than controls. Thirty-two women with eating disorder (ED) symptoms and 34 women without eating disorder symptom were individually administered structured clinical interviews regarding alcohol abuse/dependence and the eating disorders examination. They also completed self-report measures of neuroticism, urgency, sensation seeking, planning, and persistence. Women with ED symptoms reported more negative consequences of alcohol use, and higher levels of neuroticism and urgency. However, the two groups did not differ on any other personality variable. The presence of high levels of trait urgency moderated the effect of neuroticism on the negative consequences of drinking such that women with high levels of both traits reported the most consequences related to alcohol use. Rash affect regulation may be a characteristic of ED women and influence consequences of alcohol use. © 2007 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: Neuroticism; Impulsivity; Bulimia; Alcohol

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1. Explaining higher levels of problems from alcohol consumption among eating disordered women

In two recent studies, bulimic women were found to experience more negative consequences of alcohol use than controls, such as getting into fights or blacking out/forgetting what one did (Anderson, Martens, & Cimini, 2005; Dunn, Larimer, & Neighbors, 2002). In one case, this was true even though the two groups did not differ in alcohol consumption (Dunn et al., 2002). These studies are informative regarding the co-occurrence of substance abuse and eating disordered behavior. However, these studies also had two limitations. First, they did not test hypotheses regarding why the eating disordered women experienced more negative consequences of alcohol use. Second, they used self-report measures to determine eating disorder symptoms and consequences of alcohol use. In this paper, we addressed these limitations by testing hypotheses generated from an impulsivity and mood based model and by assessing the target behaviors with structured clinical interviews.

Impulsivity's influence on behaviors such as binge eating and purging and substance abuse has long been recognized. Researchers have recently addressed the multifaceted nature of this construct (Dawe & Loxton, 2004; Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003). Reward sensitivity and lack of planning/sensation seeking have both been identified as pathways to these behavior patterns (Dawe & Loxton, 2004; Verheul, 2001). We propose that women with bulimic symptoms experience problems with substance abuse via another impulsivity related pathway – that of impulsively responding to distress (Fischer, Anderson, & Smith, 2004). Impulsive responses to distress could include binge drinking, self-harm behaviors, or even binge eating itself.

Research suggests that women with bulimic symptoms tend to experience subjective distress at higher levels than non-eating disordered women. They tend to have higher levels of neuroticism, and tend to rate daily hassles as more distressing than control samples (Crowther, Snaftner, Bonifazi, & Shepherd, 2001; Stice, 2002). Alleviation of subjective distress and or negative affect reduction is endorsed as a motivation to binge eat, and expressed as a belief about the outcome of eating (Hohlstein, Smith, & Atlas, 1998; Jackson, Cooper, Mintz, & Albino, 2003). Finally, laboratory studies indicate that individuals eat in response to negative affect (Agras & Telch, 1998; Sanftner & Crowther, 1998).

Second, eating disorder symptomatology is associated with a specific impulsivity related construct: the trait of urgency, which is the tendency to act rashly when distressed (Claes, Vandereycken, & Vertommen, 2005; Fischer, Smith, & Anderson, 2003; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). In contrast, bulimic symptom levels tend not to be related to other impulsivity-like constructs, including lack of planning (acting without thinking), lack of persistence (failure to follow through on tasks), and sensation seeking (seeking out novel or thrilling stimulation) (Fischer et al., 2003; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Therefore, we propose that the combination of negative affect and the tendency to act rashly in response to that affect are personality characteristics that distinguish women with bulimic symptoms from controls.

Negative affect and urgency have been associated with increased alcohol use and severity of problems from use as well. Studies have shown positive associations between neuroticism and alcohol abuse or dependence (Grekin, Sher, & Wood, 2006; Larkins & Sher, 2006). Motivations to cope with distress are positively associated with drinking (Cooper, 1994; Cooper & Agocha, 2000). Additionally, daily diary studies of alcohol use indicate that individuals drink more on days when they experience anxiety and stress (Swendson et al., 2000). Finally, studies of experimentally

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