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Profiles of motivations for alcohol use and sexual behavior among first-year university students[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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The links between motivations for alcohol use and for sexual behaviors are not well understood. Latent profile analysis was used to identify drinking motivational profiles (based on motivations for: fun/social, relaxation/coping, image, sex; motivations against: physical, behavioral) and sex motivational profiles (motivations for: enhancement, intimacy, coping; motivations against: not ready, health, values) among college students ($N = 227$, 51% male). Latent profiles for drinking were: low for/high against drinking (34%), average drinking motives (53%), and high for/low against drinking (13%). Profiles for sex were: low for/high against sex (35%), high for/low against sex (42%), and high for with coping/moderate against sex (23%). Motivational profiles were related across behaviors. Drinking motivational profiles were associated with alcohol use and psychosocial adjustment; sex motivational profiles were associated with sexual experiences. Distinct profiles of motivations support the need for differentiated intervention programs targeting individuals with different patterns of reasons for engaging in risk behaviors during late adolescence.

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Introduction

Motivations, or the functions a behavior serves and the needs that it meets, are understood as the most proximal antecedents to behavior (Cooper, 1994; Cox & Klinger, 1988; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005). Therefore, documenting the combinations of motivations that underlie behaviors such as alcohol use and sexual behavior helps elucidate key factors in determining whether and how much individuals choose to drink and have sex. As Cooper, Frone, Russell, and Mudar (1995) argued, engagement in a single behavior, such as alcohol use, actually “represents multiple *psychologically distinct* behaviors defined by the distinct underlying functions they serve” (p. 990) for different individuals. According to this functional perspective, outwardly similar behaviors may meet very different needs and identifying these functions could be a key factor in understanding behavior (Cooper, Agocha, & Powers, 1999). That is, in order to understand behaviors such as alcohol use and sexual behavior, it is necessary to understand the motivations these behaviors serve for individuals. In the present study, we investigate configurations of motivations for alcohol use and sexual behavior in a population at risk for negative consequences associated with these risk behaviors, namely college students (Cooper, 2002), as an exploratory step to inform developmental models of behavior and interventions to promote individual well-being and public health.

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Engagement in risk behaviors such as alcohol use and risky sexual activity is a widely acknowledged cause of negative physical health-related consequences (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2000). These behaviors are also associated with risk and protective factors for psychological well-being (Zweig, Phillips, & Lindberg, 2002). Despite the negative consequences experienced from heavy drinking (e.g., hangovers, accidents) and risky sexual behavior (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases [STDs], unwanted pregnancy), many students engage in both behaviors throughout their college years (Cooper, 2002; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2005; Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2005; NIAAA, 2006). One explanation for engagement in behaviors that pose such serious risks to personal health is that these behaviors may be motivated by a variety of valued needs (Cooper & Shapiro, 1997). Indeed, adolescents and college students may be making rational choices to engage in these behaviors based on their perceptions of the importance of potential risks and benefits (Goldberg, Halpern-Felsher, & Millstein, 2002). For example, some “negative” effects of heavy drinking, such as doing or saying something embarrassing, may be reinforcing for individuals who would choose to use alcohol again in order to receive similar peer approbation (Leigh, 1989a). Therefore, it is important to understand the motivations that individuals have for engaging in and not engaging in risk behaviors.

Motivations for alcohol use

Research on individual predictors of alcohol use supports the role of motivations in predicting alcohol use cross-sectionally and longitudinally over months and years (Baer, 2002; Goldman, Del Boca, & Darkes, 1999; Komro et al., 2001; Leigh, 1989a). Adolescents and young adults typically drink to obtain social rewards, to enhance positive mood, to reduce negative mood, and to avoid social alienation (Cooper, 1994; Cox & Klinger, 1988; Kuntsche et al., 2005). Drinking for social motives appears most common, along with enhancement motives, while only a minority of college students drinks to cope (Kuntsche et al., 2005). Furthermore, drinking motivations are associated with particular patterns of alcohol use. In general, social drinkers exhibit more moderate alcohol use, enhancement drinkers engage in heavy alcohol use, and individuals with coping motivations manifest drinking problems and addictions (Cooper et al., 1995; Cox & Klinger, 1988; Kuntsche et al., 2005). College students, in particular, engage in heavy episodic alcohol use at high rates (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2008; Timberlake et al., 2007) and typically report high social motivations for alcohol use (Maggs, 1997). This body of research provides a foundation for the current study by identifying multiple drinking motivations that may be important elements in alcohol use etiology as well as its short- and long-term consequences.

Motivations for sexual behavior

Whereas public health research documents the prevalence and health consequences of sexual behaviors across demographic groups, the presence and importance of underlying sexual motivations have received less attention (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1993; Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999). However Hill's (Hill, 2002; Hill & Preston, 1996) sexual motivation model described the perceived likelihood of experiencing rewarding interpersonal incentives resulting from sexual behavior. Among college students, the most salient rewards were experiencing pleasure, needing to be valued, providing and receiving comfort, and feeling and expressing affection. Similarly, Cooper, Shapiro and Powers (1998) distinguished self-focused from other-focused sexual motivations, where the former were motivated by agentic or identity needs (e.g., affirming attractiveness) and the latter were motivated by the desire for intimacy. Surveys of adolescents (Hill & Preston, 1996; Leigh, 1989b) have empirically identified practical reasons for sex (e.g., to reproduce) as well as emotional reasons (e.g., to express closeness). A core set of reasons adolescents have sex includes loving the partner, believing that the “time is right,” and, for men, sexual opportunism (Eyre & Millstein, 1999; Leigh, 1989b). Among college students, salient motivations for sexual behavior appear to be pleasure, comfort, and affection. About half of incoming college students will have their first sexual experience during the college years (Cooper, 2002; Patrick, Maggs, & Abar, 2007; Siegel, Klein, & Roughmann, 1999).

Reasons *not* to have sex are especially understudied, despite their clear relevance for predicting behavior and for public health messages. In Sprecher and Regan's (1996) study of sexually abstaining college students, the reason rated as most important in deciding not to have sex was that students had not found the right person and were not in love. Personal beliefs, fear of rejection, and avoiding pregnancy and disease have also been reported (Leigh, 1989b; Sprecher & Regan, 1996). Therefore, readiness for sex, concerns over pregnancy and STDs, and ethical beliefs are important domains to assess as motivations not to have sex among college students.

Associations between domains of behaviors

A global overlap of alcohol use and sexual behavior is well documented, with drinkers also tending to be more likely to have sex (for reviews see Cooper, 2002; Leigh & Stall, 1993). In particular, heavy episodic drinkers tend to also engage in risky sexual behaviors, including having multiple partners. A positive relationship between the two behaviors is clear, although the level at which the association exists is less so (Cooper & Orcutt, 2000; Leigh & Stall, 1993). The ways in which these behaviors and their underlying motivations may be intricately linked within persons are not yet fully understood. For example, people who drink in order to facilitate having sex may also have sex to feel better about themselves. Understanding these cross-behavior motivations may help explain and predict both behaviors, and give insight into appropriate programs to promote health among individuals with distinct motivational profiles.

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