



Sexual orientation and substance use among college students

Jason A. Ford*, Jana L. Jasinski

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816-1360, USA

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between sexual orientation and substance use among a nationally representative sample of U.S. college and university students. Data from the 1999 College Alcohol Survey were analyzed to compare marijuana and other illicit drug use among heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual students. Findings indicate no significant differences in either marijuana or other illicit drug use for homosexual students. However, bisexuals, especially females, were more likely to have used both marijuana and other illicit drugs. These findings underscore the importance of examining bisexuals as a separate group rather than combining them together with homosexuals. The findings also indicate the presence of unique risk and protective factors based on sexual orientation.

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1. Introduction

Across the United States, college students are considered to be at great risk for substance use. For example, a review of research on substance use among college students noted 80–97% of college students had used alcohol in the year prior to the survey (Prendergast, 1994). In contrast, the knowledge base surrounding college student use of illicit drugs is much more limited. In fact, much of the literature on substance use among college students focuses primarily on heavy drinking and only tangentially on substances other than alcohol and tobacco. What little work does exist on college students' use of drugs has focused on gender and racial/ethnic differences in patterns of use (i.e. Johnston, O'Malley, &

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 407 823 2769; fax: +1 407 823 3026.

E-mail address: jaford@mail.ucf.edu (J.A. Ford).

Bachman, 1993; Humphrey, Stephens, & Allen, 1983) and has not considered sexual orientation as a viable characteristic worthy of consideration. Moreover, the small amount of research focused specifically on substance use among gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) individuals has often not included comparison groups of heterosexual individuals, has been limited by non-representative samples of GLB individuals, and has often been couched in larger studies of risky sexual behavior (Hughes & Eliason, 2002). The current study addresses many of the limitations with prior research on substance use by examining an understudied demographic characteristic, sexual orientation, and its relationship to illicit drug use in a large national sample of college students.

College students engage in a wide range of risky behaviors as they have received extensive attention in the literature. At the top of this list is substance use, particularly, heavy drinking, however, recent studies indicate an increase in marijuana and other illicit drug use among college students (Mohler-Kuo, Lee, & Wechsler, 2003; Gledhill-Hoyt, Lee, Strote, & Wechsler, 2000). For example, from 1993 to 1999 the proportion of students who were defined as current marijuana users increased by more than 20% (Gledhill-Hoyt et al., 2000). Research findings indicate anywhere between 17–30% of college students report using marijuana (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2004; Bell, Wechsler, & Johnston, 1997). In addition, data from the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health also indicate that completion of four years of college is associated with a greater likelihood of trying illicit drugs (SAMHSA, 2004). Given the sheer number of college students that use illicit drugs along with trends in increased usage, research aimed at identifying risk and protective factors is warranted.

While there has been some examination of characteristics associated with increased risk of drug use, this literature is limited. Perhaps the most stable finding is that men are more likely to use marijuana (Gledhill-Hoyt et al., 2000; SAMHSA, 2004) and other illicit drugs than are women (Gledhill-Hoyt et al., 2000; Low & Gendaszek, 2002; SAMHSA, 2004; Strote, Lee, & Wechsler, 2002). In contrast, Mustaine and Tewksbury (2004) did not find any significant gender differences in marijuana or other illicit drug use. They attribute this finding to their inclusion of lifestyle factors and suggest that what people do may be more important than who they are. This may be particularly relevant when considering sexual orientation as both a demographic characteristic and a lifestyle. In addition to gender, other demographic characteristics examined include age and race. Rates of current use are highest among young adults, the primary age group of college students and drug use peaks during college age years (SAMHSA, 2004). Several studies have also found high drug use rates (ecstasy and drugs other than marijuana) among White students (Strote et al., 2002; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2004).

A demographic/lifestyle characteristic that has received little attention is sexual orientation; though, several studies have found distinct patterns of drug use based on sexual orientation. For example, Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey and DuRant (1998) found that GLB high school students had higher rates of lifetime illicit drug use, other than marijuana, than heterosexual students. This is consistent with other research findings indicating lesbian women were more likely to initiate marijuana use prior to entering college (McCabe, Boyd, Hughes, & d'Arcy, 2003). Research using college student samples has also found a relationship between sexual orientation and illicit drug use (Pope, Ionescu-Pioggia, & Pope, 2001). In one study, bisexual adolescents were more likely to have used illicit drugs than either their gay, lesbian, or heterosexual counterparts (Boyd, McCabe, & d'Arcy, 2003; Russell, Driscoll, & Truong, 2002). Findings from a random national sample of college students also reveal that bisexuals were more likely to use marijuana than were heterosexuals or lesbians (Eisenberg & Wechsler, 2003). The authors suggest that the higher rates of drug use among bisexual college students could reflect a tendency to engage in more risky behaviors or perhaps a need to cope with a high level of social stress. This

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