



Dispositional correlates of addictive behaviors in college women: Binge eating and heavy drinking

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Abstract

Binge eating and alcohol abuse are often conceptualized as addictive behaviors. As these behaviors are relatively common among undergraduate college women, we examined whether common dispositional variables underlie their occurrence. Three hundred and thirty-five undergraduate women completed self-report questionnaires about their eating and alcohol use habits as well as dispositional measures of impulsivity, tolerance of deviance, self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, extraversion–introversion, conscientiousness, and emotional stability. Multiple regression analyses showed that women who either binge eat or abuse alcohol, but not both, have similar dispositional characteristics. Both groups exhibited a high degree of impulsivity and endorsed socially deviant attitudes; thus, both groups could be viewed as “externalizers.” In contrast, women who admitted to both addictive behaviors, i.e., binge eating as well as alcohol abuse, were not particularly impulsive or socially deviant, but manifested a high degree of emotional instability (“neuroticism”); thus, these women might be considered “internalizers.” The theoretical and clinical implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Binge eating and heavy drinking are prevalent among college-aged women and together are often classified as addictive behaviors. As many as one quarter of young women binge eat, and 10% do so once a week or more (Schlundt & Johnson, 1990). Heavy drinking is similarly prevalent. Over one third of college women binge drink (i.e., they consume four or more drinks per occasion), and 17% do so three or more times during a period of 2 weeks (Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeckens, & Castillo, 1994).

Binge eating and drinking have many overlapping features (for reviews, see Holderness, Brooks-Gunn, & Warren, 1994; Krahn, 1991; Wilson, 1991). Both may involve loss of control, cravings, and preoccupations with the substance, negative physical, social, and occupational consequences, and immediate gratification followed by long-term harm (Das, 1990). Furthermore, both behaviors may serve the function of regulating emotions and coping with stress (Lesieur & Blume, 1993).

Binge eating and drinking have been shown to co-occur in samples of high school and college students (Killen et al., 1987; Krahn, Kurth, Demitrack, & Drewnowski, 1992; Ross & Ivis, 1998; Striegel-Moore & Huydic, 1993; Timmerman, Wells, & Chen, 1990; von Ranson, Iacono, & McGue, 2002), in patient and community samples, and both behaviors also run in families (for reviews, see Holderness et al., 1994; Krahn, 1991; Wilson, 1991). Due to these similarities, binge eating has been likened to excessive drinking or drug use, and all these behaviors have often been characterized as addictive (e.g., Haenninen & Koski-Jaenes, 1999; Koski-Jaenes & Turner, 1999; Orford, 2001).

1.1. Dispositional characteristics of women who binge eat or abuse alcohol

It has been argued that the similarities between binge eating and alcohol abuse are the result of common underlying personality factors that drive these behaviors (e.g., Lacey & Evans, 1986). Studies on the dispositional characteristics of binge eaters and heavy drinkers have identified a number of factors that are commonly associated with these behaviors. First, in both clinical and non-clinical samples, bulimics and alcohol abusers tend to score higher than controls on impulsivity (e.g., Battaglia, Przybeck, Bellodi, & Cloninger, 1996; Cook, Young, Taylor, & Bedford, 1997; Diaz-Marsa, Carrasco, & Saiz, 2000; Grau & Ortet, 1999), although the findings for non-clinical samples are equivocal (Bushnell, Wells, & Oakley-Browne, 1996; Welch & Fairburn, 1996). It has also been shown that behavior problems correlated with impulsivity (drug misuse, shoplifting, sexual promiscuity, self-harm, suicide attempts and Cluster B, i.e., borderline, histrionic, antisocial, narcissistic, personality disorders) are more prevalent among women who binge eat, abuse alcohol, or do both (Bulik, Sullivan, Carter, & Joyce, 1997; Fichter, Quadflieg, & Rief, 1994; Grilo, Becker, Levy, & Walker, 1995; Hatsukami, Mitchell, Eckert, & Pyle, 1986; Lacey, 1993; Lilienfeld et al., 1997; Matsunaga et al., 2000; Nagata, Kawarada, Kiriike, & Iketani, 2000; Sansone, Fine, & Nunn, 1994; Suzuki, Higuchi, Yamada, Komiya, & Takagi, 1994; Suzuki, Higuchi, Yamada, Mizutani, & Kono, 1993; Vitousek & Manke, 1994).

High tolerance of deviance is a second disposition that often separates women who binge eat or abuse alcohol from normals (Dykens & Gerrard, 1986; Grau & Ortet, 1999; Palme & Palme, 1999; Sieber & Angst, 1990; Strassberg, Ross, & Todt, 1995; Yeager, DiGiuseppe, Resweber, & Leaf,

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