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The relationship among alcohol use, related problems, and symptoms of psychological distress: Gender as a moderator in a college sample

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Abstract

This research evaluated the prevalence of general symptoms of psychological distress, the degree to which these symptoms related to alcohol use and alcohol-related negative consequences, and gender-specific relationships among alcohol use, alcohol consequences, and symptoms of psychological distress. The sample included 1705 students drawn from a random sample of three West Coast universities who completed the survey. Results revealed higher levels of consumption and more negative drinking consequences for men, more psychological distress symptoms reported by women, and stronger relationships between psychological symptoms and drinking consequences than use per se. The association between psychological distress and negative drinking consequences was stronger among men than women. The present findings suggest that a focus on negative consequences of alcohol use in addition to the use itself may have greater utility in identifying students at risk for comorbid psychological distress to provide intervention.

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Keywords: College students; Drinking; Psychopathology

1. Introduction

Excessive alcohol use is a common and significant problem on college campuses. Research indicates that up to 90% of college students drink alcohol, with 25–50% being considered “heavy” or “binge” drinkers (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000). Students who abuse alcohol

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are at high risk for developing negative consequences, such as traffic accidents, academic failure, risky sexual behavior, and alcohol dependence (Marlatt et al., 1998). Research has also found surprisingly high rates of psychological distress among student populations, particularly depression and anxiety (Kushner & Sher, 1993; McDermott, Hawkins, Littlefield, & Murray, 1989). However, there is considerable disagreement in the literature regarding whether, and under what circumstances, alcohol use by college students is related to psychological distress.

Gender and gender differences may account for some of the conflicting findings in studies of the relationship among alcohol use, alcohol problems, and psychological distress. Past studies have revealed gender differences in the development of drinking patterns and mental health problems, although even in this research, there are some inconsistent results (Berger & Adesso, 1991). Whether the relationship between psychopathology and alcohol use and related problems might be moderated by gender in college students has been relatively understudied. There is preliminary evidence to suggest that the relationship between mood symptoms and alcohol use might be stronger for men than for women (Berger & Adesso, 1991).

The current research was designed to replicate and extend prior research and to address the gaps in the literature. The research specifically evaluates, in a large random sample of college students, the prevalence of psychological distress symptoms, the degree to which these symptoms are related to alcohol use and alcohol-related negative consequences, and gender-specific relationships among alcohol use, alcohol consequences, and psychological distress.

Consistent with other findings, men were expected to drink more alcohol more frequently than women drink and to have more alcohol-related problems. Women were expected to have more symptoms of psychological distress than men. We expected that symptoms of psychological distress would be positively related to both alcohol use and alcohol-related negative consequences. Finally, we examined whether gender would moderate the relationship among alcohol use, alcohol-related problems, and symptoms of psychopathology. These relationships must be elucidated to develop effective prevention and intervention approaches.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure

The current study consists of year 1 data from an ongoing, large, longitudinal, multisite study examining social norms and their role in college student drinking. Students completed paper or web assessments, which took approximately 45 minutes. As incentives, students were given two movie tickets and entered into drawings for one \$500 gift certificate and twenty \$100 gift certificates. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of all three Universities.

2.2. Participants

The sample was drawn from a pool of randomly selected undergraduate students at three west coast, public institutions. Participants included 1705 students (1181 women and 524

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