Binge eating behavior in college students: What is a binge?

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Aim: The purpose of this study was to explore binge eating (BE) behavior in male and female college students.
Background: BE is a disordered eating behavior frequently reported in college students and is of particular concern because of its link to the development of eating disorders and obesity.
Methods: An anonymous online survey was conducted and open-ended responses (n = 425) were coded using qualitative methods. Chi-square analyses were used to determine if gender differences existed.
Results: Findings indicate that females were more likely to report emotional concerns such as stress and negative affect prior to BE and poor body image and negative affect following episodes of BE. Meanwhile, males indicated more substance use, exercise, and hunger before a BE episode, with feeling satisfied or full after BE. Males were also more likely to report BE socially on meal type foods, while women were more likely to be at home or alone while BE.
Conclusions: Significant gender differences were noted indicating the need for tailored interventions. Nurses should screen college students for disordered eating behaviors, as well as associated concerns that may precede binge eating episodes including substance use, stress, and negative affect.

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1. Background

Binge eating (BE), defined as consuming a large amount of food in a short period of time while experiencing a loss of control over eating, is a commonly reported disordered eating behavior and a defining characteristic of bulimia nervosa (BN), binge eating disorder (BED), and anorexia nervosa (AN)-binge eating/purging subtype (AN-BP) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although full syndrome eating disorders are rare, rates of disordered eating behaviors are increasing in the college-aged population, a high-risk demographic for developing clinically significant eating disorders (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007; White, Reynolds-Malear, & Cordero, 2011). In addition to the development of eating disorders, BE is also associated with obesity, chronic muscle pain, insomnia, and physical health impairments (Reichborn-Kjennerud, Bulik, Sullivan, Tambs, & Harris, 2004).

Several barriers to the identification of BE symptoms exist. Most significant among these are that individuals may be embarrassed to discuss their eating behavior with health providers as well as the fact that clinicians do not routinely screen for this behavior. Additionally, most studies examining the experience of BE have looked at clinical samples of women, particularly those diagnosed with BN (Wolfe, Baker, Smith, & Kelly-Weeder, 2009). Women with infrequent or occasional BE behaviors may be missed due to a limited understanding of this experience and potential difficulty in identifying these individuals. Finally, research on BE behaviors in men is extremely limited (Striegel, Bedrosian, Wang, & Schwartz, 2012), hindering the ability to identify which men should be screened.

In the college population, there is a paucity of research on BE behavior that does not meet the diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder and these studies primarily focus on female students. In a study of female college students exhibiting subthreshold BED symptoms, ecological momentary analysis (EMA) found lower mood ratings on binge versus non-binge days (Wegner et al., 2002). Another study of college students investigated differences in the definition of a binge among those who met criteria for BED and those who did not and included both men and women (Reslan & Saules, 2011). Among students who did not meet the criteria for clinically significant BED, gender differences existed in the types of food consumed, compensatory behaviors, and mood during a binge episode (Reslan & Saules, 2011).

Given the rising rates of binge eating behavior and the adverse consequences associated with this behavior, it is imperative that researchers and clinicians understand what college students mean when they report a BE episode. Additionally, it is critical to investigate the gender differences associated with this behavior in order to assist in the development of appropriate screening tools and interventions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the experience of BE in male and female college students.

2. Methods

A secondary analysis of data from a larger study was conducted using a mixed methods approach. The parent study investigated eating

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behaviors in college students and was an anonymous, Web-based survey of undergraduates conducted at a private university in the northeastern United States. Students were invited to participate in the original study by email and were directly linked to the survey after providing informed consent. A series of open and closed ended questions were posed investigating binge eating as well as the participants' thoughts about the antecedents and consequences of this behavior. Additional questions requested the participant to provide detailed information about a BE episode. Upon completion of the study, students could elect to enter a raffle for $50 Amazon gift certificates. Two thousand, seventy-three students completed the original study. Institutional review board (IRB) approval was provided for the original study as well as this secondary analysis.

Six hundred and ten students reported binge eating in the parent study. Respondents who reported BE and completed each of the four additional open-ended questions, which specifically addressed the description of a binge, were included in this investigation. Participants may not have answered all parts of question three, which asked them to describe the type of food, amount, setting and length of BE. If they answered any part of question three, they were included in the analysis. The final sample for this secondary analysis included 425 participants.

2.1. Measures

Study participants provided demographic information as well as details about their height, weight, exercise and smoking behaviors. BE was defined as consuming an amount of food that is definitely greater than what most people would eat within a 2 hour time period while feeling unable to control how much they ate or stop the behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The following open ended questions were asked of every participant who reported BE: (1), What types of activities or situations seem to precede a binge-eating episode?; (2), How do usually feel before a binge-eating episode?; (3), Please describe a binge-eating episode. How much do you usually eat? What types of foods? Where do they commonly occur? How long do they last?; (4), How do you usually feel after a binge-eating episode?

2.2. Data management and analysis

The parent study collected participant responses anonymously using Survey Monkey®, an online survey software system. All data were stored on the researcher's secure account, which was only available to members of the research team.

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample. Bivariate analyses were conducted to compare the students who reported BE (n = 610), with the students who reported BE and completed all of the open-ended questions (n = 425) to highlight any significant differences. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used for continuous variables and chi square tests were conducted for categorical variables. Relationships were considered significant if a $p \leq 0.05$ was reached.

Responses from the open-ended questions were coded according to qualitative descriptive data analysis techniques (Sandelowski, 2000). The goal of the qualitative descriptive approach is to stay close to the data with a minimal amount of interpretation (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative descriptive analysis uses participants' language to develop coding schemes to limit the researcher's influence on interpretation and provide an accurate account of the event (Sandelowski, 2000).

Student reports of BE were read and reread to become familiar with and immersed in the data (Creswell, 2007). Descriptions of the BE experience were then read to identify key concepts and phrases in the data (Creswell, 2007). Coding categories were created for each question based on significant phrases and concepts using terms from participants' responses (Sandelowski, 2000). As analysis continued, some code categories became more prominent while others were less relevant. After each question was coded, code categories with similar themes or concepts were collapsed (Creswell, 2007). In the end, each question had codes to identify the common themes expressed by participants.

The responses to a question were searched for the coded themes, giving each question a number of responses for each code. A response by a single participant may have more than one code category for each question because it may express several of the code categories for that question. The summation of participant responses were recorded and entered into SPSS 17® for chi square analysis. Gender differences were investigated using chi-square for each question code category. The level of significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1. Sample characteristics

The study sample consisted of 425 undergraduate students ranging in age from 18 to 22 with a mean age of 19.84 (SD = 1.05). Students were predominantly Caucasian (79.8%) and female (75.1%). Additional sample characteristics are provided in Table 1. No significant differences were found between the participants who responded to all four binge description questions (n = 425) and those who did not (n = 185) on age (F = 3.179, $p = 0.075$), gender ($\chi^2 = 0.993$, $p = 0.319$), or racial background ($\chi^2 = 0.993$, $p = 0.803$).

3.2. Descriptive analysis

Participant responses to most questions were in the form of short answers with some students providing sentences or longer descriptions. The four most commonly cited activities or situations occurring before a binge for the entire sample (n = 425) were being stressed (33.7%, n = 143), drug use (24.5%, n = 104), being bored/having nothing to do (22.8%,

Table 1
Demographics.

Age	Percentage of respondents, n = 425
18	12.7% (n = 54)
19	24.5% (n = 104)
20	30.6% (n = 130)
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22	1.6% (n = 7)
Race	Percentage of respondents
Caucasian	79.8% (n = 339)
Asian	9.2% (n = 39)
Hispanic	3.8% (n = 16)
Other	7.3% (n = 31)
Originally from	Percentage of respondents
Northeast	72.2% (n = 307)
Midwest	7.8% (n = 33)
Southwest	7.1% (n = 30)
Southeast	6.4% (n = 27)
Outside of US	3.8% (n = 16)
Northwest	2.8% (n = 12)
Living situation	Percentage of respondents
On Campus	81.4% (n = 346)
Off Campus	18.6% (n = 79)
Roommates	Percentage of respondents
Alone	3.8% (n = 16)
1 roommate	28.7% (n = 122)
2 roommates	12.5% (n = 53)
3 or more roommates	53.4% (n = 227)
Live with parents	1.6% (n = 7)
Working status	Percentage of respondents
Do not work	51.3% (n = 218)
Part time	32% (n = 136)
Full time	0.9% (n = 4)
Work study	15.8% (n = 67)

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