



Sexual assault, drinking norms, and drinking behavior among a national sample of lesbian and bisexual women

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined sexual assault history, drinking norms and drinking behavior.
- We used a national sample of lesbian and bisexual women.
- Alcohol-involved sexual assault was associated with higher drinking norms.
- Alcohol-involved sexual assault was associated with more alcohol use.
- Physically forced sexual assault was not associated with drinking norms or alcohol use.

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ABSTRACT

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and adolescent/adult sexual assault (ASA) are strongly associated with women's alcohol use and the rates of both alcohol use and sexual assault history are higher among lesbian and bisexual women than heterosexual women. Although descriptive drinking norms are one of the highest predictors of alcohol use in emerging adults, this is the first study to examine the relationship between sexual assault history, drinking norms, and alcohol use in lesbian and bisexual women. We found that CSA severity was associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing more severe alcohol-involved ASA, more severe physically forced ASA, and was indirectly associated with more drinking behavior and higher drinking norms. Additionally, more severe alcohol-involved ASA was associated with higher drinking norms and more drinking behavior, but physically forced ASA was not. These findings help explain previous contradictory findings and provide information for interventions.

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1. Introduction

Sexual assault history, which can include childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and/or adolescent/adult sexual assault (ASA), is strongly associated with women's alcohol use (for reviews, see Testa & Livingston, 2009; Ullman, 2003). Despite high prevalence of CSA and ASA among lesbian and bisexual women, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual assault history using lesbian and bisexual samples (for exceptions, see Hughes, McCabe, Wilsnack, West, & Boyd, 2010; Hughes, Johnson, & Wilsnack, 2001; Hughes, Szalacha, Johnson, Kinnison, Wilsnack & Cho, 2010). One prevailing explanation for the relationship between sexual assault history and alcohol use is that alcohol is consumed to decrease psychological distress associated with sexual assault history (Stewart, Morris, Mellings, & Komar, 2006). However, psychological distress has

not been found to consistently mediate relationships between trauma exposure and alcohol use (McCauley et al., 2010; Testa & Livingston, 2000; Testa, Livingstone, & Hoffman, 2007; Walsh, Danielson, McCauley, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 2012). Other elements, such as perceptions of drinking norms, have generally not been examined as potential factors contributing to the relationship between sexual assault history and alcohol use. Research emphasizing the role that perceptions of drinking norms play in drinking behavior (e.g. Borsari & Carey, 2001; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004) suggests that this is an important but understudied risk factor for drinking consequences like sexual assault. This study aims to address gaps in the literature by examining the associations among drinking norms, sexual assault history and drinking behavior in lesbian and bisexual women.

1.1. Alcohol use and sexual assault history

Among women in the general population, the majority of research suggests that sexual assault history is associated with higher levels of

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alcohol consumption, levels of heavy episodic drinking (4 or more drinks for women in 2 h or less), and rates of drinking-related problems (Miller & Downs, 1995; Najdowski & Ullman, 2009; Ullman, 2003; Wilsnack, Wilsnack, Kristjanson, Vogeltanz-Holm, & Harris, 2004). Additionally, re-assault rates from CSA to ASA are high and both are related to increased drinking behavior. However, findings demonstrating relationships between ASA and subsequent alcohol use are mixed (Mouilso, Fischer, & Calhoun, 2012; Ullman, Najdowski, & Filipas, 2009; Walsh et al., 2012).

One issue with the body of literature examining sexual assault history in relation to alcohol outcomes is that alcohol-involved ASA is rarely analyzed on its own, but instead is subsumed under other forms of ASA such as coerced or physically forced ASA (Bedard-Gilligan, Kaysen, Desai, & Lee, 2011; Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009; McCauley, Ruggiero, Resnick, Conoscenti, & Kilpatrick, 2009; McCauley, Ruggiero, Resnick, & Kilpatrick, 2010; Resnick, Walsh, McCauley, Schumacher, Kilpatrick, & Acierno, 2012; Zinzow, Resnick, Amstadter, McCauley, Ruggiero, & Kilpatrick, 2010). Approximately one-third to two-thirds of ASAs involve alcohol use on the part of the victim, the perpetrator, or both (Abbey et al., 2004; Littleton, Breitkopf, & Brenson, 2008; Reed, Amaro, Matsumoto, & Kaysen, 2009). Physically forced ASA is when force or threat of force is used by the perpetrator and alcohol-involved ASA is when alcohol is used as a tactic for sexual assault or when the victim is intoxicated and therefore unable to consent. Combining ASA, regardless of the presence or absence of victim intoxication makes it difficult to know if the relationships between sexual assault and later drinking behavior are explained by alcohol-involved sexual assaults or whether it is sexual assault per se that is associated with increased alcohol use and problems. The few studies examining this issue have found that alcohol-involved ASA does appear to be more strongly associated with higher binge drinking and more drinking consequences following assault when compared to physically forced or coerced sexual assaults (Bedard-Gilligan et al., 2011; McCauley et al., 2009; McCauley, Ruggiero, Resnick, & Kilpatrick, 2010).

1.2. Sexual assault and alcohol use risk for lesbian and bisexual women

Lesbian and bisexual women tend to drink more and experience more alcohol-related consequences compared to their heterosexual counterparts (for a review, see Hughes, 2011) and are at higher risk than heterosexual women for sexual assault in adulthood (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; D'Augelli, 2003; Hughes, Johnson, & Wilsnack, 2001; Hughes, 2011; Hughes et al., 2010; Tomeo, Templer, Anderson, & Kotler, 2001). In a review of 75 studies examining sexual assault among sexual minorities, Rothman, Exner, and Baughman (2011) found that lifetime prevalence rates of sexual assault among lesbian and bisexual women are as high as 85%. Similar to heterosexual women, lesbian and bisexual women with a sexual assault history are more likely to experience a subsequent ASA (Martin, Fisher, Warner, Krebs, & Lindquist, 2011). Hughes, Johnson, and Wilsnack (2001) examined the relationship between sexual assault history and lifetime alcohol abuse. Surprisingly, they found an association between ASA and increased alcohol abuse only in heterosexual women, but not in lesbian women. In a more recent study using a U.S. national probability sample, Hughes et al. (2010) examined the relationship between sexual assault history (both CSA and ASA) and alcohol use disorders in heterosexual and sexual minority men and women and consistent with previous findings, sexual minority women were at higher risk for CSA and ASA than heterosexual women. Also, among those who identified as mostly lesbian or mostly heterosexual, revictimization (both CSA and ASA histories) predicted hazardous drinking. However, research conducted to date with lesbian and bisexual women has not examined the specific role of alcohol-involved ASA in understanding drinking outcomes.

1.3. Social normative perceptions and drinking

Research examining the relationship between sexual assault and drinking outcomes has predominantly focused on the role of drinking to cope, wherein alcohol is consumed in response to the stress and symptoms associated with sexual assault (e.g., Grayson & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2005). Although this model has much merit, there are many reasons why young adults consume alcohol, including for social facilitation and positive reinforcement (e.g., Capron & Schmidt, 2012). Recent longitudinal studies suggest that heavy alcohol use appears to precede ASA rather than increasing as a result of an ASA (Messman-Moore, Ward, & Brown, 2009; Mouilso et al., 2012; Walsh et al., 2012). Given the strong role that social norms play as predictors of alcohol use and alcohol-related sexual behavior in young adults (Lewis, Lee, Patrick, & Fossos, 2007; Lewis & Neighbors, 2007; Neighbors et al., 2010), an examination of the role of social norms in the relationship between sexual assault and alcohol use is warranted.

Descriptive drinking norms, the perceived norms about alcohol use of one's peer group, are one of the strongest predictors of alcohol use among emerging adults (Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Overestimation of peer drinking has been shown to increase alcohol use (e.g. Borsari & Carey, 2001; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004) and negative alcohol-related consequences (Clapp & McDonnell, 2000). Conversely, higher drinking behavior has also been associated with higher drinking norms both longitudinally and in brief event-level studies (Cullum, Armeli, & Tennen, 2010; Neighbors et al., 2006). What is highly likely is that descriptive drinking norms have a reciprocal relationship with alcohol use such that having higher drinking norms is associated with more alcohol use, and in turn more alcohol use is associated with higher drinking norms (Cullum, Armeli, & Tennen, 2010; O'Grady, Cullum, Tennen, & Armeli, 2011). Elevated descriptive drinking norms may be particularly problematic in groups, such as sexual minorities, who are at heightened risk for alcohol use (Eisenberg & Wechsler, 2003; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Corbin, & Fromme, 2008).

Despite the substantial growth of research and interventions using the social norms approach to drinking in high risk groups, little attention has been given to the role of descriptive norms on the drinking behaviors of sexual minorities (Eisenberg & Wechsler, 2003; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008). In a national study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students (Eisenberg & Wechsler, 2003), behavioral peer norms, meaning what the actual norms of the community were, were not related to binge drinking among women. However, descriptive drinking norms, or the perceived behavioral peer norms, were not examined. In contrast, a prospective study of high school students conducted by Hatzenbuehler et al. (2008) found that lesbians drank more alcohol than heterosexual women. Specifically, they found that descriptive norms mediated the relationship between sexual orientation and drinking in high school such that lesbians had higher perceived norms for drinking than heterosexual women and these descriptive norms predicted drinking behavior.

Given that descriptive drinking norms are related to higher rates of drinking, alcohol-related problems, and alcohol-related risky sexual behaviors, and that women with a sexual assault history drink more than those without such histories (for reviews, see Testa & Livingston, 2009; Ullman, 2003) it would be expected that drinking norms would also be related to sexual assault. However, to our knowledge, no study has examined this relationship. Moreover, as lesbian and bisexual women are at risk for sexual assault and are more likely to engage in heavier drinking, this group may be one that is especially important to focus on in understanding these relationships.

1.4. Current study

The current study examines the relationship among sexual assault history, drinking behavior, and drinking norms in emerging adult lesbian and bisexual women. Consistent with previous research, we

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