



The nature and correlates of young women's peer-directed protective behavioral strategies[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Self-employed PBS are effective in decreasing alcohol-related harm among young people.
- A scale measuring PBS was developed for young women when drinking alcohol.
- Two conceptually distinct types of PBS were found.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Recently, a number of studies have identified self-employed Protective Behavioral Strategies (PBS) as effective in decreasing the level of alcohol-related harm among young people. However, much of the published research has ignored important gender differences, such as women's increased tendency to rely on PBS that are social in nature. To further the understanding of women's PBS, the current study sought to investigate the nature and correlates of the strategies young women employ to keep their friends safe when drinking (i.e., peer-directed PBS).

Method: A scale measuring peer-directed PBS was developed and administered in conjunction with existing measures of alcohol consumption, personal PBS, and peer attachment. Participants consisted of 422 women aged 18–30 years, recruited among psychology students and the general public.

Results: Exploratory factor analysis revealed two clusters of peer-directed PBS; those that were aimed at reducing intoxication among one's friends and those that were designed to minimize alcohol-related harms. Further analysis found a positive relationship between women's tendency to implement personal and peer-directed PBS and that risky drinkers were less likely to engage in personal or peer-directed PBS (either type).

Conclusion: Findings indicate that personal and peer-directed PBS are related behaviors that are less frequently adopted by risky drinkers.

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1. Introduction

While young women have been identified as a population at risk for heavy drinking (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011; Roche & Deehan, 2002) and related negative outcomes (e.g., Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004) relatively little is known about the strategies used by this group to reduce the instances of alcohol-related harms. In this article, the nature and correlates of the protective behavioral strategies (PBS) specific to young women's alcohol use will be explored in an attempt to increase the understanding of the factors that reduce risky drinking among young women.

In recent years the gap between men and women's alcohol consumption has been closing (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2012; Grucza, Norberg, & Bierut, 2009; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009); a trend that is especially evident among younger generations (McPherson, Casswell, & Pledger, 2004). The increasing number of women who consume high levels of alcohol has made an impact on injury and crime statistics. Between 1998–99 and 2005–2006, women's alcohol-related hospital admissions in Australia were found to be increasing more rapidly than those of men (ABS, 2008) and a study investigating alcohol-related incidents attended by police found that a sizable portion (26.8%) of alcohol-related offenses involved female perpetrators (Palk, Davey, & Freeman, 2008). In addition, young women who consume high levels of alcohol continue to be at risk for a number of negative outcomes including risky sexual practices, violence, sexual assault, and drink spiking (Griffin, Scheier, Acevedo, Grenard, & Botvin, 2012; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004; Parks, Hsieh, Lorraine Collins, & Levonyan-Radloff, 2011; Taylor, Prichard, & Charlton, 2004; Testa & Livingston, 2009).

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In order to reduce the harm associated with young women's drinking, it is necessary to consider the social and cultural context within which it occurs. For both young men and women, this context often facilitates and normalizes heavy alcohol consumption (e.g., O'Grady, Cullum, Tennen, & Armeli, 2011; Sheehan & Ridge, 2001). Research indicates that the pharmacological effects and symbolic meaning associated with heavy alcohol use plays a part in many important social and developmental events experienced by young people. For instance, it has been shown that young people use alcohol as a way of exploring their identities (Peralta, 2008; Rúdólfssdóttir & Morgan, 2009), to gain a sense of belonging among their peers (Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010), and to navigate their entry into the adult world (Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002). Given that many positive events are linked with alcohol consumption, it is perhaps not surprising that young people rarely identify their use as problematic (Sheehan & Ridge, 2001) and might be unwilling to refrain from or make substantial changes to their consumption (Armstrong, Watling, Davey, & Darvell, *in press*).

However, research indicates that although young people often are unwilling to reduce or drastically change their alcohol consumption, they tend to use a range of PBS to attempt to keep themselves safe. The literature has shown that these PBS are behavioral (e.g., eating before drinking) (Benton et al., 2004; Lawrence, Abel, & Hall, 2010; Martens et al., 2005) or cognitive in nature (e.g., deciding not to exceed a set number of drinks) and can either be personal (e.g., alternating alcoholic drinks with water) or social (e.g., making sure that a friend follows you home) (Martens et al., 2005).

Recently, these indigenous behaviors have sparked an interest in the research literature, with a number of studies investigating the impact of PBS on drinking outcomes. These investigations, primarily using mixed gender samples of university students, have sought to measure the prevalence and outcomes of PBS. Typically, PBS are measured using scales such as the Protective Behavioral Strategies Survey (PBSS) (Martens, Pederson, LaBrie, Ferrier, & Cimini, 2007; Martens et al., 2005) where respondents indicate how often they use a number predetermined PBS strategies. Findings from these studies have supported the notion that PBS are effective in reducing overall alcohol use (Labrie, Lac, Kenney, & Mirza, 2011), instances of heavy episodic drinking (Borden et al., 2011), as well as a range of negative alcohol-related outcomes, including memory loss, doing something you later regret (Delva et al., 2004), poor academic performance (Benton et al., 2004), unwanted sexual experiences (Delva et al., 2004; Haines, Barker, & Rice, 2006), physical injury (Borden et al., 2011), and driving after drinking (Martens, Martin, Littlefield, Murphy, & Cimini, 2011).

In order to further the understanding of the PBS construct, a series of studies using factor analysis methods have been conducted. Typically, these studies show that PBS that are undertaken to reduce negative alcohol-related outcomes (e.g., driving while under the influence or engaging in unprotected sex) are theoretically distinct from PBS that aim to control or reduce the quantity of alcohol that is consumed (e.g., DeMartini et al., 2012; Haines et al., 2006; Martens et al., 2005, 2007). This distinction appears to add to the knowledge of how PBS impacts on drinking and related outcomes. PBS that target alcohol consumption directly reduces drinking levels (Labrie et al., 2011) and indirectly reduces alcohol-related harms through decreased consumption levels (DeMartini et al., 2012).

The research conducted to date therefore suggests that PBS are used by young people in order to reduce alcohol-related harms. In addition, factor analyses have provided valuable information on the underlying structure of these protective behaviors. However, this body of literature displays one important limitation as investigations of PBS from a gender-specific perspective have yet to be conducted. Yet, when samples of men and women are compared, gender differences are often detected. One such key finding is that women, to a greater extent than men, rely on PBS that are social rather than personal in nature. Such strategies can include making sure that they go home with a friend (Walters, Roudsari, Vader, & Harris, 2007) or having a roommate

present during drinking sessions (Clapp, Shillington, & Segars, 2000). Moreover, research on gender differences in social support lends credence to the notion that women's PBS contains a strong social focus; while men often have large social networks women are more likely to seek and provide social support (Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008; Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002).

The reliance on social PBS to keep safe has been found in qualitative research investigating young women's drinking in and around licensed venues. For example, Brooks (2008) conducted a series of interviews with young Scottish women and discovered that in addition to using PBS that were specifically designed to mitigate risks of sexual assault (e.g., not accepting drinks from strangers), young women often attended public venues as a group and kept their friends in sight for the duration of the night. In an Australian study focusing specifically on young women's risk perception and strategies for keeping safe while drinking, Armstrong et al. (*in press*) found that the friendship group was central to young women's PBS within what was coined 'a culture of helping'. Among other things, they found that the peer group offered young women protection against harm from other intoxicated people and helped to moderate the vulnerability women often experienced as a result of their intoxication.

Taken together, the research to date regarding women's PBS and social support suggest that social PBS is important to young women's safety when drinking. However, the burgeoning literature on PBS has been focused on identifying and assessing PBS that are designed to reduce the risk to oneself. The tendency to engage in protective strategies designed to reduce risk to one's peers has therefore remained untapped, potentially masking a vital aspect of young women's PBS. As such, the current investigation sought to address this gap by focusing solely on women's peer-directed PBS by way of investigating the underlying structure of these types of strategies and the relationship they hold to related behaviors and construct such as personal PBS, peer attachment, and alcohol consumption. Further, while peer-directed PBS are the focus of the current investigation, personal PBS are nonetheless often endorsed by young women and have been linked to decreases in negative outcomes (Delva et al., 2004). As such, the current investigation also sought to measure whether there is a relationship between the tendency to engage in personal and peer-directed PBS. Moreover, attachment or affinity has been shown to relate to other protective behaviors (e.g. preventing drinking and driving; see Rabow, Newcomb, Monto, & Hernandez, 1990). Therefore peer attachment was assessed to provide an indication of whether PBS are more common among friends with strong mutual attachment or if young women's helping behaviors extend equally to all female drinking companions. Finally, as previous research has shown that heavy drinkers are less likely to use PBS (Walters et al., 2007) despite studies indicating that PBS might benefit this population in terms of reduced negative outcomes (Benton et al., 2004; Haines et al., 2006) the current study will also investigate the impact alcohol consumption has on peer-directed PBS.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Following University Approval for Human Research, participants were recruited from the general public as well as from a first year Psychology student cohort. In total 422 women aged between 18 and 30 years ($M = 21.95$ years, $SD = 3.00$) who reported having consumed alcohol in the previous three-month period participated in the study. Of this sample 174 participants (41.2%) were students, 21 (5.0%) were unemployed and 314 (74.4%) indicated that they were employed on a casual, part-time, or fulltime basis. No statistically significant differences between student and non-student participants' endorsement of peer helping behaviors were found (see below). Most commonly, the participants reported that they live with their parents (48.6%), followed by friends or flatmates (21.1%) or with their partner/spouse (21.3%).

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