

Research Paper

Participants' sports characteristics related to heavy episodic drinking among French students

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Abstract

Background: The relationships between involvement in sports and alcohol consumption appear to be complex in the alcohol literature. In this study we aimed to examine this link among French students, taking into account their sports characteristics. We also examined variations in alcohol use among sport sciences students between 2002 and 2006, and the difference in alcohol use and heavy episodic drinking among sport sciences, law and pharmacy students.

Method: *Design:* repeated survey; cross-sectional study; *Setting:* self-questionnaire survey; *Participants:* French (south-east France) sport sciences ($n = 693$), law ($n = 325$) and pharmacy ($n = 338$) students (females = 58%).

Results: In 2002, 38% of the male sport sciences students reported repeated heavy episodic drinking, and this proportion has risen to 48% in 2006 ($p < 0.05$). When compared to law and pharmacy students, female and male sport sciences students were less likely to report repeated heavy episodic drinking ($p < 0.05$). Engaging in physical activity (whether or not it takes place within an institution) and practising martial art were negatively related to heavy episodic drinking ($p < 0.05$). Other factors related to heavy episodic drinking were gender-specific: among males, practising sport in a formal context, team sports, and competitive participation at a departmental or regional level represented risk factors ($p < 0.05$), while practising an individual sport was a protective factor among females ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: This study corroborated the importance to take into account the context of practice and the type of sport practised to examine the link between sport participation and alcohol consumption. The normative context of peer socialization among competitive and team sports participants seemed to play a role in alcohol use. Further studies are needed to confirm the role of this putative factor.

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Keywords: University students; Alcohol; Heavy episodic drinking; Physical activity; Context of sport participation; Repeated surveys

Introduction

In France as in several other developed countries there is a long-term trend toward decreasing alcohol consumption (World Health Organization, 2000). Nevertheless, France is still among the European countries with Portugal, Lux-

embourg, Ireland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Spain and Germany where the prevalence of alcohol use remains at high levels (Beck & Legleye, 2004). Moreover, despite this general trend, unsafe drinking has not declined among adolescents and young adults, including university students (Gill, 2002). Precisely, in the university students subpopulation, recent studies conducted in several countries revealed that these young adults have a very high prevalence of harmful drinking (e.g. Gill, 2002; Lorente, Peretti-Watel, Griffet, & Grélot, 2003; Wetherill & Fromme, 2007). Studying alcohol use among university students is important because the alcohol habits initiated during the first years of college are likely

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to persist during all years of higher education (Vik, Cellucci, & Ivers, 2003). As a result, a lot of studies have examined risk and protective factors for alcohol use among college students. Many of them have focused on the area of sport participation, indicating that athletes have higher rates of alcohol use than nonathletes (Leichliter, Meilman, Presley, & Cashin, 1998; Nelson & Wechsler, 2003; O'Brien, Blackie, & Hunter, 2005; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdell, Grossman, & Zanakos, 1997). Given the increased risk for alcohol use, it seems clear that researchers must continue to examine alcohol consumption of college athletes. Recently, one study (Ford, 2007) examined variation in alcohol use among athletes on the basis of sport/team affiliation, showing that male hockey athletes and female soccer athletes were more likely to report heavy episodic drinking than the other athletes of the same sex. In France, two previous studies targeted sport sciences students (Lorente et al., 2003; Lorente & Grélot, 2003) to investigate gender differences in patterns of alcohol consumption, but without considering the role of the participants' sports characteristics. Since the relationships between involvement in sports and alcohol consumption appear to be complex, with certain nuances being associated with certain sports (Lorente, Souville, Griffet, & Grélot, 2004), we suggest that examining the participants' sports characteristics may help to understand the link between sport participation and alcohol consumption among young adults. Hence, in order to further characterize the alcohol consumption behaviours already observed among sport sciences students by Lorente et al. (2003) and Lorente and Grélot (2003), the first aim of this study was to address the variation in heavy episodic drinking among French sport sciences students on the basis of their sport participation. Heavy episodic drinking is used to refer to drinking over an evening or similar time span. In research literature, there is a certain consensus to operationally define heavy episodic drinking as the consumption of 5 or more alcoholic beverages in a sitting for both men and women (e.g. Naimi, Lipscomb, Brewer, & Gilbert, 2003). However, this definition can be slightly different across the studies, as it may also refer to the consumption of at least five alcoholic beverages in a sitting by men and four for women (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Rimm, 1995), or at least six alcoholic beverages for both sexes (Nilsen, Holmqvist, Nordqvist, & Bendtsen, 2007). In this study, we opted to operationally define heavy episodic drinking as the consumption of five or more alcoholic beverages in a sitting for both men and women.

Recent studies (e.g. Beck, Legleye, Guilbert, & Peretti-Watel, 2005; Legleye et al., 2006) stressed complex changes in patterns of alcohol consumption in France, especially among young adults, and showed that the patterns of consumption of alcohol may change quickly. For instance, the prevalence of regular use of alcohol (i.e. more than 10 times per month) in 18-year-old French men has increased from 16% to 21.2% between 2000 and 2003. For these reasons, it appears important to perform repeated surveys. Hence the second aim of the present study was to measure variations in

alcohol use and heavy episodic drinking among sport sciences students between 2002 and 2006.

Then, we wanted to address the variation in alcohol use and heavy episodic drinking among several groups of students on the basis of their academic disciplines (pharmacy, law, and sport sciences students). We examined the link between participants' sports characteristics and heavy episodic drinking, taking into account the type of sport practised, the competitive participation and the context of practice, i.e. within a club, within an informal context (with family, friends, or alone), or both. Results of such a study would help experts leading prevention and treatment programs to adapt their messages toward specific targets.

Method

Participants

This study was approved by the local university ethics committee, and was based on a self-reported questionnaire administered to a sample of sport sciences students from the University of Marseilles in 2002 ($n=380$) and 2006 ($n=313$), and in the same year (2006) to a sample of several academic disciplines students from the Southern France Universities in Montpellier and Aix-en-Provence: pharmacy students ($n=338$) and law students ($n=325$). Only second- and third-year students were surveyed. First-year students were excluded because they are considered not representative of the population, as two thirds of them fail end-of-year exams and stop studying in the field. Fourth-year students were also excluded because among the sport sciences students, some of them studied a course on addiction, which could change their attitude and representation toward alcohol use.

Procedure

The procedure used for this survey was identical from 2002 to 2006, and for sport sciences, law, and pharmacy students. In order to avoid responses bias such as under-reported or over-reported consumption for social norms reasons, it was made clear that the survey was anonymous and strictly confidential and that there were no "right or wrong" answers. Students were also free to refuse to answer the questionnaire. Approximately, 25 subjects were tested at each session, which lasted 20 min. Subjects were sat one per table, each table separated from the others by at least 2 m in all directions. An experimenter was always present to ensure no communication between subjects. At the end of the session, the subjects placed their questionnaire in a common ballot box.

Material

The same self-reported questionnaire was used in 2002 and 2006 (see Appendix in Lorente et al., 2003). The first part characterized the population in terms of demographics

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