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It isn't all just fun and games: Collegiate participation in extracurricular activities and risk for generalized and sexual harassment, psychological distress, and alcohol use

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ABSTRACT

Collegiate extracurricular activities, despite their benefits, may place students at an increased risk for experiencing harassment. This study utilizes multiple waves of data from an online longitudinal survey to examine how participation in college activities (intramural sports, fraternities/sororities, school clubs) relates to experiences of sexual and generalized harassment and outcomes (psychological distress, heavy alcohol use) among undergraduates ($N = 1852$, 58.6% female, 57.4% White) in the Midwestern United States. Activity participation was related to harassment, but the pattern depended on the activity, harassment type, and sex. Fraternity/sorority involvement was associated with generalized harassment, whereas school club involvement was linked to both generalized and sexual harassment. Female intramural athletes were at an increased risk to experience both harassment types. In addition to direct relations, activity participation was indirectly linked to future psychological distress (depression, anxiety) and heavy alcohol use via harassment. Implications for intervention with this college student population are discussed.

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Involvement in extracurricular activities is often viewed as an avenue for developing strong interpersonal skills. For example, membership in these activities has been linked to college students' enhanced decision making, leadership, teamwork and communication (Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Rubin, Bommer, & Baldwin, 2002). Further, activity participation may yield intrapersonal benefits; individuals often report heightened feelings self-esteem and increased psychological resiliency as a result of these experiences (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006a; 2006b; Kort-Butler & Hageman, 2011). Yet, participation is not uniformly linked to positive outcomes. For example, participation in some activities can promote substance use, as well as heighten the risk of experiencing harassment, particularly for women (e.g., Grossbard, Geisner, Neighbors, Kilmer, & Larimer, 2007; Maggs, Williams, & Lee, 2011; Peguero, 2009). Given that harassment may contribute to problematic outcomes such as heavy drinking as well as psychological distress (e.g., McGinley, Richman, & Rospenda, 2011; Richman et al., 1999), the current

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study sought to better understand the extent to which extracurricular activity participation contributes to the risk for harassment and negative mental health and alcohol use consequences in a U.S. college student population.¹

Notably, studies on harm during activities in higher education have often focused on bullying, physical types of victimization or sexual coercion/assault (e.g., Allan & Madden, 2012; Franklin, 2010; Peguero, 2009). Researchers have yet to examine more common forms of victimization, such as harassment. Thus, the current study sought to address this gap by focusing on two major types of harassment: sexual harassment and generalized harassment. In a school setting, *sexual harassment* can be defined as any sexual behavior that interferes with a student's right to an equal education, and can include any type of unwanted sexual behavior based on a student's sex, such as inappropriate touching, sexist jokes, and requests for sexual favors (Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 92 S. 659, 1972). Sexual harassment has been reported by 40%–60% of college women (Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald, & Waldo, 1998; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Kalof, Eby, Matheson, & Kroska, 2001; Shepela & Levesque, 1998) and 28–51% of college men (Kalof et al., 2001; Shepela & Levesque, 1998). In contrast, *generalized harassment* in a school setting can be defined as any negative interpersonal interaction that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment, and/or one that may affect the conditions placed on a student as they relate to his or her academic standing, but which is not based on legally protected categories, such as sex or race (Rospenda & Richman, 2004). Researchers have found that 21–25% of college students in the U.S. report bullying victimization (Chapell et al., 2006, 2004; Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). Studying both generalized and sexual harassment is important as large groups of undergraduates report being recipients of both forms, and also view these types of harassment as conceptually distinct (Walsh & Magley, 2014).

Extracurricular activities and harassment

While participation in intercollegiate sports has been identified as a protective factor against harassing experiences (Fasting, Brackenridge, Miller, & Sabo, 2008; Peguero, 2009), *intramural sports* participants are more likely to be victims of peers' verbal and physical harassment (Peguero, 2009; Popp & Peguero, 2011). Compared to intercollegiate sports, intramural sports participation is not mandatory, less competitive (games are limited to other teams on campus), and more focused on individual well-being and recreation. Thus, scholars have posited that this type of activity lends itself to victimization because either 1) these students do not possess significant social status as compared to intercollegiate athletes, or 2) these activities may not be well supervised by adults or other official school figures (Peguero, 2009). Popp and Peguero (2011), for example, reported that high school intramural athletes were more likely to be victims of bullying or property destruction/theft than those not playing intramural sports. Similar rationale can also apply to students participating in school clubs or activities. Indeed, participation in school clubs (e.g., academic clubs, hobbies, fine arts activities, service) has also been a risk factor for experiencing physical and verbal harassment in high school (Peguero, 2009).

Less is known, however, how these same activities in *college* may predispose an individual to being harassed. Some research has been conducted examining victimization in *Greek* organizations, though typically focusing on sexual assault. Greek organizations refer to the membership-based, single-sex social fraternities (men) and sororities (women) who use Greek letters to label their organization. These social organizations are typically located at undergraduate institutions in the United States, and are known for heavy alcohol use (Cashin, Presley, & Meilman, 1998). Kalof (1993) reported that women belonging to sororities were more likely than other female undergraduates to report sexual coercion involving physical force and alcohol-related nonconsensual intercourse. More recent studies have linked sorority membership with increased likelihood of sexual assault, including rape (Franklin, 2010; Minow & Einolf, 2009). Still, others have found that Greek members are not more likely to experience sexual coercion (physical contact) than the general population; this may be attributed to mandated date rape education in the Greek systems (Gardella et al., 2015; Sawyer, Schulken, & Pinciario, 1997). Regarding other types of peer harassment, Allan and Madden (2012) reported that a specific form of bullying, hazing, was reported by a majority of Greek members (73% reported experiencing at least one type of hazing behavior). Along with intercollegiate athletes (74%), fraternity/sorority participation was most associated with being a victim of hazing behaviors when compared to eight other college-level activities.

In regards to examined outcomes, the studies cited above have primarily chosen to examine either physical harassment (e.g., Peguero, 2009), highly specific types of bullying restricted to a certain period of time (e.g., hazing; Allan & Madden, 2012), or physical types of sexual assault or coercion (e.g., Franklin, 2010; Gardella et al., 2015). Although intramural sports and school club participants self-report more physical types of generalized harassment victimization (e.g., Peguero, 2009); it is still unclear whether they are at risk to experience more broadly defined generalized harassment, and whether collegiate level participants are at a similar risk to be victims of harassment. Moreover, less is known regarding how participation in these intramural sports and school clubs may alter risk for sexual harassment. Men who participate in intramural sports seem to be more likely to embrace favorable attitudes toward sexual harassment due to heightened sexist attitudes (Covell, 1999). However, other studies have found evidence that participating in any sport in college may protect one against sexual assault (though not necessarily harassment) (Fasting et al., 2008). While research has been conducted

¹ Researchers have found that the definition and prevalence of sexual and generalized harassment or bullying differs across cultures (Paludi, Nydegger, Desouza, Nydegger, & Dicker, 2006; Pörhölä, Cvanara, Kaal, Tampere, & Torres, 2015). Because a discussion of cross-cultural issues is beyond the scope of this article, we refer readers who are interested in learning more about cross-cultural differences in these constructs to the aforementioned sources.

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