



The associations among personality, alcohol-related Protective Behavioural Strategies (PBS), alcohol consumption and sexual intercourse in Irish, female college students

Sinéad Moylett^{a,b,*}, Brian M. Hughes^a

^a School of Psychology, National University of Ireland Galway, University Road, Galway, Ireland

^b Division of Population Medicine, School of Medicine, Cardiff University, 3rd Floor, Neuadd Meirionnydd, Heath Park, Cardiff CF14 4YS, UK



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Protective behavioural strategies
Personality
Women
Alcohol consumption
Sexual intercourse

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The study presented one of the first examinations of the associations among personality, alcohol-related protective behavioural strategies (PBS), alcohol consumption, sexual intercourse and sex-related alcohol negative consequences in Irish, female college students ($n = 522$).

Methods: A cross-sectional observational design was employed and participants completed the study online. Participants completed measures of personality, alcohol-related PBS, alcohol consumption and sexual intercourse. Hierarchical multiple regression was utilised to access the associations between such measures.

Results: From the analyses, it was found that age, frequency of sexual intercourse, frequency of alcohol consumption, level of alcohol consumption and openness were all significantly related to the use of alcohol-related protective behavioural strategies, and in turn, sex-related negative consequences. However, inconsistent findings with other personality dimensions to those of previous research were noted.

Conclusions: The findings of this study posited that the use of PBS has a key role to play in the levels of sexual intercourse and alcohol consumption, age and openness, and the associated negative sexual consequences in Irish, female college students.

1. Introduction

In the College Lifestyle and Attitudinal National Survey (CLAN survey), Hope, Dring, and Dring (2005) examined over 100,000 undergraduate students from 21 third level colleges in Ireland and reported that the total volume of alcohol consumed per head of student (based on the total sample of students) within one college year was 18.3 l of pure alcohol for males and 10.8 l for females. Martens et al. (2005) argued when examining alcohol consumption, a cause for serious concern can be the consequences of such consumption. Studies have shown that individuals who are defined as heavy episodic drinkers, compared to occasional heavy episodic drinkers or non-heavy episodic drinkers, are more likely to experience alcohol-related consequences (e.g., missing class, arguing with friends, not using protection when having sex, getting into trouble with the police, needing medical treatment for alcohol overdose, etc.; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000; Wechsler et al., 2002). The CLAN survey (Hope et al., 2005) additionally found that because of alcohol consumption, 11.4% of Irish female students surveyed had taken part in unintentional sex, with 9.2% reporting unprotected sex and regular female binge drinkers reporting that they were less likely to use the contraceptive pill.

1.1. Protective Behavioural Strategies

In attempts to better understand and identify factors affecting alcohol consumption and the related consequences among university students, research examining cognitive-behavioural strategies (termed as “protective behavioural strategies”; PBS) and their possible association to various health-related behaviours (alcohol consumption, condom use, sexual behaviour, alcohol-related sex negative consequences) has begun (Martens, Ferrier, & Cimini, 2007; Lewis, Logan, & Neighbors, 2009; Palmer, McMahon, Rounsaville, & Ball, 2010; Patrick, Lee & Larimer, 2011). PBS have been defined as cognitive-behavioural strategies used to limit or reduce the amount of alcohol consumption and/or minimize the related negative consequences that could occur from such (Benton et al., 2004; Delva et al., 2004; Glassman, Werch, & Jobli, 2007; Martens et al., 2005; Sugarman & Carey, 2007). PBS include such strategies as alternating alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks, spacing drinks, setting a limit on the level of alcohol consumption, or using a designated driver (Lewis, Rees, Logan, Kaysen, & Kilmer, 2010). PBS are seen as offering considerable potential as they are designed to help individuals be safer or more responsible when drinking (Martens et al., 2005), and as such, are viewed as potential components for interventions to aid

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: moyletts@tcd.ie (S. Moylett).

individuals in exercising more responsible drinking behaviours (Martens et al., 2005).

The consequences of high alcohol consumption can result in negative consequences for not just the individual (Martens et al., 2005), but additionally other students and the institutions that it could potentially affect (Perkins, 2002; Wechsler, Moeykens, Davenport, Castillo, & Hansen, 1995). Hope et al. (2005) reported that 74% of male Irish students and 65% of female Irish students experienced at least one of a range of alcohol-related harms/problems, such as “regretted things said or done after drinking” (62%), “felt effects of alcohol while at class/work” (50%), “missed school/work days” (44%) and “harmed studies/work” (28%). Furthermore, those who were classed as regular binge drinkers were more likely to partake in risk taking behaviours. Overall within the literature, findings show that those who utilise PBS consume less alcohol and experience fewer alcohol-related problems (Araas & Adams, 2008; Haines, Barker, & Rice, 2006; Martens, Pederson, LaBrie, Ferrier, & Cimini, 2007; Walters, Roudsari, Vader, & Harris, 2007). In one of the first studies examining PBS, Martens et al. (2004) using a set of eight PBS, found that participants who employed PBS experienced fewer negative consequences when compared with those who did not, when controlling for alcohol consumption and gender. Similar results have been found by Benton et al. (2004) and Delva et al. (2004) in their respective studies.

With other research suggesting an association between alcohol consumption and sex-related risks, such as greater risk of contracting an sexually transmitted infections (STIs), having multiple and/or casual partners, being less likely to discuss sex-related topics and partaking in unprotected sexual activity (Goldstein, Barnett, Pedlow, & Murphy, 2007; Lewis et al., 2010), some studies have begun to examine the associations between alcohol consumption and specifically sex-related alcohol negative consequences (Lewis et al., 2009; Lewis et al., 2010). Due to the support that PBS are receiving throughout the literature, studies have begun to become more specialised in the kinds of PBS, samples, individual differences, drinking circumstances and related consequences which they examine, such as condom-related PBS (Lewis et al., 2009; Lewis, Kaysen, Rees, & Woods, 2010), drinking during the 21st birthday week (Lewis et al., 2012), gender differences (Howard, Griffin, Boekeloo, Lake, & Bellows, 2007; Walters et al., 2007), drinking games and “partying” drinking behaviours (Martens et al., 2007); however, more needs to be done in terms of examining specifically sex-related negative consequences.

1.2. Gender differences

It should be noted that a large proportion of the research conducted on PBS and its relation to various behaviours has been conducted in the US (Lewis et al., 2009; Lewis et al., 2010; Martens et al., 2009; Nguyen, Walters, Wyatt, & DeJong, 2011). Furthermore, no study has examined drinking PBS and its relation to personality or specific outcomes (e.g., sex-related negative consequences) in females alone. Previous research has found results indicating differences between males and females in regard their overall use of PBS and in the types of PBS used. Studies have consistently found that women are more likely to utilise PBS, and use them more effectively, when compared with males (Benton et al., 2004; Benton, Downey, Glider, & Benton, 2008; Delva et al., 2004; Haines et al., 2006; Walters et al., 2007). Following on from these results, Walters et al. (2007) reported that females were more likely to use social PBS for limiting alcohol use and avoiding drinking and driving (e.g., “Make sure that you go home with a friend”).

In a qualitative study examining protective strategies among college freshmen, Howard et al. (2007) found that women placed a large amount of importance on knowing what the plan was for the night, and again were more likely to employ particular social protective strategies, e.g. “(1) always going back with the same group you began with, (2) girls depending on the guys in the group to look out for them and prevent them from getting into unsafe situations...and (3) group members monitoring the amount and frequency of alcohol consumption

of other group members (p. 249)”. Research has suggested a few reasons for the differences in men and women in terms of their alcohol consumption and their use of PBS: women's physiology, in that they metabolise alcohol slower than men and therefore experience the effects of intoxication more quickly and intensely (LaBrie, Kenney, Lac, & Garcia, 2009); social pressure, in that women perceived more social pressure in terms of what is seen as acceptable why they drinks (DeMartini, Carey, Lao, & Luciano, 2011); and personality traits (Pervin & John, 1999). It has been suggested because of these gender differences in the use of PBS, that the employment of such strategies may have a greater impact in reducing sex-related alcohol negative consequences for females (Lewis et al., 2010).

1.3. Individual differences

In trying to better understand the individual differences between alcohol consumption and alcohol-related behavioural consequences, Kaly, Heesacker, and Frost (2002) posited that the alcohol myopia theory (AMT) was “the single most important theory for understanding the association between alcohol use and risky sexual behaviour” (p. 839). AMT suggests that alcohol has a causal effect on sexual behaviour, producing a “myopic” focus on cues (Steele & Josephs, 1990; Taylor & Leonard, 1983). It has been argued that an individual's sexual risk behaviour is decided by which idiosyncratic focus (on either positive or negative consequences) is most salient to that particular individual (Fromme, Karz, & Rivet, 1997). According to Davis, Hendershot, George, Norris, and Heiman (2007), “individual differences in a priori perceptions of the benefits and risks of unprotected sex may be predictive of each individual's personal relative salience of impelling versus inhibiting situational cues (p. 845)”; after consuming alcohol, these personally impelling or inhibiting cues can have more of a narrowed and concentrated focus.

The theory explains the behaviour as a kind of cognitive function impairment, in that the consumption of alcohol causes attention to be paid more to impelling cues rather than to inhibiting cues, and not all the information from the surrounding environment is processed (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2004; Cooper, 2002; George & Stoner, 2000; Lewis et al., 2010). In a study comparing sober and intoxicated men, it was found that those who had consumed alcohol were more likely to say that they would have sex without a condom after watching a video of a couple who wanted to have sex but did not have a condom (MacDonald, Zanna, & Fong, 1995, 1996), suggesting that the intoxicated men paid more attention to the sexual arousal cues rather than the dangers of unprotected sex. AMT posited that individuals who use PBS consume less alcohol and therefore, can attend to both impelling and inhibiting cues, hence reducing their changes of experiencing negative consequences (Lewis et al., 2010). From this it can be suggested that to reduce the risky sexual behaviour, the level and frequency of alcohol consumption must be reduced first.

1.3.1. Personality traits

Other researchers have chosen to examine individual differences in alcohol consumption through personality dimensions. The Big Five personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, neuroticism, openness; Costa & McCrae, 1985) have been shown as some of the most useful and recurrent when examining personality (Fiske, 1949, as cited in Funder, 1997). It is also the most extensively used model of personality within current research (Spence, Owens, & Goodyer, 2012). In particular, the five-factor model of personality has been displayed as a reliable measure across ages and cultures, displays good retest reliability in the same individual over time (McCrae, Costa, Terracciano, Parker, & Mills, 2002; McCrae, Kurtz, Yamagata, & Terracciano, 2011), and have been found to have differential associations with health behaviours (Morrison & Bennett, 2006). When examining personality in relation to sexual behaviour, sensation seeking, a trait that has been found to overlap with conscientiousness within the Big Five in

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