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The influence of motives on alcohol- and sex-related behaviors among female college students



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Although previous studies have elucidated associations between motivations for drinking and sex as they relate to risky health outcomes among female college students, the utility of cross-domain motives (i.e., alcohol motives predicting sex-related outcomes and vice versa) in the prediction of specific alcohol- and sex-related behaviors has yet to be examined. The current study examined relations between drinking and sex motives with multiple risky alcohol- and sex-related outcomes (i.e., alcohol consumption, alcohol-related problems, alcohol consumption prior to sexual intercourse, number of sexual partners [vaginal, oral, anal], and emergency contraception use).

Procedures: Multiple structural equation models were used to examine univariate and multivariate associations among drinking and sex motives and specific outcomes in a sample of female undergraduates with lifetime histories of alcohol use and sexual activity ($N = 436$; 77% White, 21% Hispanic).

Results: Findings indicated differential associations between motives and specific outcomes across univariate versus multivariate analyses. Multivariate models indicated greater endorsement of enhancement and less endorsement of intimacy sex motives were significantly associated with heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems, whereas alcohol motives were less reliably linked to sex-related outcomes. When considered simultaneously, sex motives accounted for more variance in some alcohol outcomes relative to certain drinking motives. **Conclusions:** Cross-domain motives may be useful in predicting risky outcomes among female college students. Research implications include the importance of examining motive-behavior relations in univariate and multivariate contexts. Clinical implications include cross-domain motive assessment and use of emotion regulation strategies to reduce emotionally-motivated maladaptive alcohol- and sex-related behaviors.

1. Introduction

1.1. Drinking and Sex Motives

College students are at risk for excessive alcohol consumption (Johnston et al., 2016), related problems (e.g., academic difficulties, impaired driving; Perkins, 2002), and risky sexual behaviors (Cooper, 2002). Thus, motivational processes which relate to young adults' drinking and sexual behaviors are of interest to researchers and clinicians. Cooper et al. (2000) suggest similar underlying motivational processes for alcohol- and sexual-risk behaviors. Based on the motivational model of alcohol use by Cox and Klinger (i.e., consuming alcohol for either positive or negative reinforcement; 1988, 1990), drinking motives are defined by reinforcement source (i.e., self- versus other-

focused) and valence. Cooper (1994) demonstrated evidence for four drinking motives: 1) social, 2) coping, 3) enhancement, and 4) conformity (see Cooper et al., 2016 for a theoretical and empirical review of the motivational model). Cooper et al. (1998) then used this same framework to categorize motives for sexual behavior, which also include self-focused/positive reinforcement (i.e., enhancement), other-focused/positive reinforcement (i.e., need for intimacy), self-focused/negative reinforcement (i.e., self-affirmation and coping), and other-focused/negative reinforcement (i.e., peer and partner approval) motives.

1.2. Drinking Motives Associated with Drinking-related Outcomes

Although college students tend to endorse enhancement motives

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(e.g., celebratory drinking) and social motives as reasons for drinking alcohol (Read et al., 2003), all four motives have been linked to alcohol-related outcomes among college students (Cooper, 1994; see Kuntsche et al., 2005, 2014). More broadly, Carey and Correia (1997) found positive- and negative-reinforcement drinking motives were univariately associated with consumption and alcohol-related problems, whereas only negative-reinforcement motives (i.e., coping, conformity) were predictive of problems in multivariate models after accounting for alcohol consumption levels. Overall, associations between specific drinking motives and alcohol outcomes tend to vary as a function of the outcome under examination.

1.3. Sexual Motives Associated with Sex-related Outcomes

Broadly, research indicates distinct sexual motivations predict various sexual risk behaviors (e.g., multiple partners, casual sex; Cooper et al., 1998; Cooper et al., 2011; Grossbard et al., 2007). Individuals high in coping motives report riskier sexual practices (e.g., multiple partners and lack of birth control methods) compared to their low-coping-motive counterparts (Cooper et al., 1998). However, previous work also suggests an inverse relation between intimacy motives and lifetime number of sexual partners, whereas this outcome is positively associated with mood-enhancement motives (Gebhardt et al., 2003). Thus, evidence indicates that specific sex motives may be protective against one sexual outcome and a risk factor for another.

1.4. Drinking Motives Associated with Sex-related Outcomes

Drinking motives have also been shown to be predictive of sexual outcomes. For example, Dvorak et al. (2016) found endorsement of coping motives for drinking was directly associated with sexual “hookups,” or sexual encounters without romantic commitment (Fielder and Carey, 2010), whereas social and enhancement motives were indirectly linked with hookups via alcohol consumption among college students. In univariate models, coping, conformity, social, and enhancement drinking motives have also been found to be associated with negative social and personal consequences related to sexual activity (Norberg et al., 2011).

1.5. Sex Motives Associated with Drinking Outcomes

Specific sex motives have been shown to predict frequency of drinking before or during sexual episodes. For example, Grossbard et al. (2007) found greater levels of enhancement motives for sex were associated with an increase in drinking before or during sex, whereas intimacy motives were associated with significantly less drinking before or during sex among college athletes. However, Owen et al. (2014) found no significant associations between sex motives and alcohol/substance misuse in an all-female sample. Nevertheless, drinking prior to sexual activity may yield negative outcomes, and motivational influences driving these behaviors are important and need to be understood.

1.6. Rationale

Despite a myriad of research on drinking and sex motives, little is known about interrelations among motives for alcohol and sex or how these constructs simultaneously contribute to engagement in risky alcohol use, risky sexual behavior, or both. Previous theoretical and empirical work has established that certain drinking motives may relate to risky sexual outcomes (Cooper et al., 1998; Dvorak et al., 2016; Norberg et al., 2011). Further, the co-occurrence of alcohol consumption and risky sexual activity suggests that drinking and sex motives may be predictive of alcohol- and sex-related outcomes (Caldeira et al., 2009). Given evidence that alcohol-related consequences may be more negative for female college students (see Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004), and

some sexual consequences can exclusively impact females (e.g., pregnancy), investigating cross-domain motives among this population is warranted. To our knowledge, this has yet to be examined.

The current study examined the extent to which drinking and sex motives independently and multivariately relate to specific alcohol and sexual risk-taking outcomes among a sample of female college students. Because motives have been shown to differentially relate to alcohol consumption, related problems, and consumption prior to sexual activity, all three were examined. Risky sexual behavior can be operationalized several different ways (e.g., number of partners, use of emergency contraceptives), so multiple sex-related outcomes were examined. Finally, because drinking and sex motives are defined using the emotion-regulation two-dimensional motivational framework, it is plausible that cross-domain motives (i.e., sex motives predicting alcohol outcomes and vice versa) will be associated with outcomes in ways similar to domain-specific motives (i.e., positive- and negative-reinforcement motives will differentially relate to risky drinking- and sex-related outcomes).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 611$) were female undergraduate students from a large, Hispanic-serving southwestern university recruited from introductory psychology and communication courses. Participants completed a battery of demographic questions and self-report measures online. All procedures and measures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants received research course credit for their participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

Participants self-reported demographic information, including age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and relationship status, which was dichotomized (i.e., single/not dating/dating multiple individuals coded “casual,” and committed long-term relationships coded as “steady;” Brown and Vanable, 2007). Sexual orientation, assessed as “How would you describe your current sexual orientation?” was dichotomized into exclusively heterosexual (endorsed by 80%) versus other.¹

2.2.2. Motives

2.2.2.1. Drinking Motives Questionnaire – Revised. The Drinking Motives Questionnaire-Revised (DMQ-R; Cooper, 1994) is a 20-item measure with response options on a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) *never* to (6) *almost always*, and four subscales: coping, conformity, social, and enhancement. Each subscale consists of five items. Cronbach's alphas ranged from .88 to .93 in this study.

2.2.2.2. Sexual Motives Scale. The Sexual Motives Scale (SMS) is a 29-item measure assessing six primary motives for sexual behavior: intimacy, coping, enhancement, self-affirmation, partner approval, and peer approval (Cooper et al., 1998). Each subscale consists of 4–5 items, assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) *almost never/never* to (5) *almost always/always* (Cronbach's alphas = .87–.91).

2.2.3. Outcomes

2.2.3.1. Sexual Behavior History. Lifetime number of vaginal, oral, and anal sex partners (three separate items), as well as two items assessing

¹ Sexual orientation was dichotomized given the low base rates endorsed by individuals who identify as non-exclusively heterosexual (i.e., exclusively homosexual = 8%, primarily homosexual = 2%, equally homosexual and heterosexual = < 1%, primarily heterosexual = 8%, queer = < 1%, unlabeled/questioning = < 1%, and no sexual interest = < 1%).

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