



Interactions among drinking identity, gender and decisional balance in predicting alcohol use and problems among college students



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ABSTRACT

Background: The aim of the present study was to test promising constructs (decisional balance and drinking identity) and their interaction with gender as predictors of risky college drinking. We expected that, consistent with previous work, drinking identity would be positively associated with alcohol consumption and problems. We further expected that drinking identity would be more strongly related to outcomes among individuals scoring low in decisional balance. Additionally, we expect the relationship between drinking identity and alcohol behavior to vary as a function of decisional balance.

Methods: Participants included 329 undergraduates ($M = 23.11$; $SD = 5.63$; 74.47% female) who met heavy drinking criteria (defined as women who consumed 4 or more drinks per occasion and men who consumed 5 or more drinks per occasion) and completed an online survey comprised of self-report measures. **Results:** Decisional balance was negatively correlated with both drinking and problems, which partially supported expectations. As expected, drinking identity was positively correlated with drinking and problems. A two-way interaction emerged between drinking identity and decisional balance regarding problems, indicating that drinking identity was associated with more problems, especially among those lower in decisional balance. A three-way interaction between drinking identity, decisional balance, and gender emerged regarding problems such that drinking identity was associated with more problems for those lower in decisional balance and this effect was stronger among men.

Discussion: Findings lend support to the perspective that decisional balance, drinking identity, and gender are all influential factors that are associated with the experience of alcohol problems.

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1. Introduction

College students are more likely to drink heavily than their non-college peers (Johnston et al., 2012). On average, about 40% of college students report having engaged in heavy drinking during the last two weeks (Johnston et al., 2006). Heavy episodic drinking (binge drinking) occurs when a woman consumes four drinks in a row or when a man consumes five drinks on one occasion at least once in a 2-week period (Courtney and Polich, 2009). Heavy episodic drinking among college students is associated with a range of serious primary (e.g., psychological impairment, memory loss, risky sexual behavior, unplanned pregnancies, suicidal ideation,

and addiction) and secondary consequences (e.g., academic impairment, sexual victimization, car accidents, violence, and death; Hingson and Zha, 2009; Gonzalez and Hewell, 2012; Ragsdale et al., 2012). Thus, the U.S. Surgeon General has declared reducing heavy drinking among college students a major health goal for the country (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

Although many college drinking interventions have been developed and evaluated, findings have indicated modest effects of these interventions, especially over the longer term (see Scott-Sheldon et al., 2014 for a meta-analytic review). Thus, it is important to continue to explore predictors of risky college drinking, focusing on their complex interactions with one another, to provide ideas for further tailoring of college drinking interventions. In this study, we evaluated the relative contributions of some innovative and promising predictors, decisional balance and drinking identity, and their interactions with gender to aid in the prediction of risky college drinking.

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1.1. Decisional balance and college drinking

Researchers seeking to develop effective strategies to reduce alcohol misuse and associated problems among college students have considered the importance of increasing motivation for effectual decision-making. In this context, the decisional balance procedure is a motivational tool used to facilitate decision-making and asks individuals to list both their personal pros and cons of maintaining and changing their drinking behaviors. This allows the individual to reflect on their drinking behavior. Previous work suggests that decisional balance can be used to overcome denial and enhance alcohol problem recognition (McCready and Epstein, 1999; Nye et al., 1999), and that it has shown mixed outcomes as an intervention to decrease college drinking and related problems (Carey et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2005; LaBrie et al., 2006).

In addition to exploring the utility of decisional balance as an intervention, researchers have validated decisional balance as an assessment of the extent to which a person's motivation is balanced toward behavior change (Collins et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 1997; King and Diclemente, 1993; Migneault et al., 1999). Decisional balance theoretically overlaps with motivation to change, a construct that stems from the Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska et al., 1992a,b). Studies have indicated that decisional balance has been associated with drinking outcomes (e.g., LaBrie et al., 2006; Share et al., 2004). Research has also shown that decisional balance has better predictive validity for drinking outcomes compared to alcohol expectancies (Noar et al., 2003) and readiness to change (Collins et al., 2009). Therefore, we expected that decisional balance would be negatively associated with drinking and positively associated with problems.

1.2. Drinking identity

Although Transtheoretical Model-based drinking studies have not specifically explored drinking identity (e.g., Sun et al., 2007), research generally suggests that drinking identity is positively associated with alcohol consumption (e.g., Neighbors et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2007), which in turn is linked with alcohol-related problems (e.g., Lindgren et al., 2013). Drinking identity is conceptualized as how central or defining alcohol consumption is to one's self-identity (Conner et al., 1999). How integrated drinking is in one's self-identity may influence both drinking behavior and motivation for drinking. For instance, social media-related drinking identity (i.e., posting photos of one consuming alcohol) was related to higher alcohol consumption and problematic alcohol-related behaviors (Ridout et al., 2012).

1.3. Gender

Previous research has demonstrated time and again that gender is a central factor to consider in alcohol research (Choo et al., 2013; Korcha et al., 2014). With regard to increased drinking and associated problems, males have consistently been shown to be at greater risk than females (e.g., Caetano, 1994; Greenfield et al., 2000; Korcuska and Thombs, 2003; Randolph et al., 2009). College students also report that they believe men drink more heavily, are more likely to drink and drive, are less concerned with campus alcohol use, and use fewer protective behavioral strategies than their female counterparts (Lewis and Neighbors, 2004; Lewis et al., 2009). In order to inform more effective interventions for targeted harm reduction, researchers have recognized the need for both increased concentration on college populations and more in-depth investigation of subgroup differences (e.g., gender; Cranford et al., 2009; O'Brien et al., 2004). As such, research examining gender differences with respect to known antecedents to drinking (drinking identity) and buffers against drinking (decisional

balance) may have both practical utility and clinical significance in terms of informing drink-reduction programs.

1.4. Interactions among decisional balance, drinking identity, and gender with respect to alcohol outcomes

Although these variables have been studied separately, the interactions among these variables in their association with alcohol use and related problems have not yet been fully explored. Regarding the influence of gender on decisional balance, previous research among students sanctioned for violating the university's alcohol policy revealed that males reported more pros to continue drinking and that they were less ready to change their drinking habits relative to females (Carey and DeMartini, 2010). Further, males thought their friends were more approving of the alcohol sanction than females. Thus, males may have experienced social pressure to maintain their drinking because their friends were more understanding of them being sanctioned for alcohol use. However, it is unclear if this effect would remain if students' friends were unaware that they were participating in an alcohol reduction program as student's friends may be more aware of the amount of drinks the student is consuming and may be more likely to encourage increased drinking. O'Hea et al. (2003) examined gender differences in decisional balance without social pressure to engage in a given behavior and revealed that males reported greater positivity than females in both smoking cessation and engagement in exercise, while no gender differences were revealed with dietary fat reduction.

Further, drinking identity and gender differences therein have been revealed such that college males have reported stronger drinking identities than college females (Foster et al., 2013). Moreover, undergraduate males may view heavy drinking as part of being a man (Peralta, 2007). The majority of college age males perceive the ability to consume large amounts of alcohol without negative consequences (e.g., vomiting, fainting) as masculine, and view the experience of these consequences as feminine and weak (Peralta, 2007). Past research has demonstrated that the process for changing drinking behavior is different by gender such that men are more likely to change after an adverse event whereas women are more likely to change their drinking behavior when they are able to modify how they identify with the behavior (Bischof et al., 2000; Klingemann, 1991).

1.5. Current study aims and hypotheses

The aim of the present study was to test promising constructs (decisional balance and drinking identity) and their interaction with gender as predictors of risky college drinking. Consistent with past research, we expected that drinking identity would be positively associated with alcohol consumption and problems. Moreover, we examined the relationship between drinking identity and alcohol outcomes by considering decisional balance as a potential moderator. Specifically, we expected that drinking identity would be more strongly related to outcomes among individuals scoring low in decisional balance (that is, participants who receive a decisional balance score closer to 0, as calculated per details outlined by Collins et al., 2009). As drinking identity is positively related to alcohol behavior, we expect this relationship to vary as a function of decisional balance. To illustrate, it is possible that individuals whose self-identity is strongly intertwined with alcohol consumption (those high in drinking identity) may be at greater risk for problems if they also have low motivation to reduce their drinking (those low in decisional balance). It is possible that those who are high in drinking identity may also experience or identify with drinking-related problems such as going to school drunk or neglecting to study for a test. Thus, these problems may be viewed

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