



## Examining the effects of drinking and interpersonal protective behaviors on unwanted sexual experiences in college women



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the main effects of drinking and specific IPBs on unwanted sex.
- We examined whether specific IPBs moderated drinking's impact on unwanted sex.
- Drinking and unwanted sex were positively related when considering two IPBs.
- Vigilance IPBs and unwanted sex were negatively related after controlling drinking.
- The IPB "talking to people who know a potential partner" reduced drinking's impact.

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Recent evidence suggests interpersonal protective behaviors (IPBs) may be more effective than alcohol-based strategies at decreasing alcohol-related sexual consequences. However, no studies have examined individual IPBs to assess their unique influences on specific sexual consequences. The current study used a longitudinal design to examine the direct effects of typical weekly drinking and specific IPBs on unwanted sex. IPBs were also examined as moderators of the relationship between drinking and unwanted sex.

**Methods:** Randomly sampled female drinkers attending a northeastern university ( $N = 191$ ) completed a baseline survey measuring typical weekly drinking and IPBs and a six-month follow-up assessing unwanted sex. Bootstrapped regression examined the effects.

**Results:** Drinking predicted unwanted sex after accounting for IPBs (range of  $bs = .008-.009$ ,  $SE = .005$ , 95% CI  $[-.000, .02]$ ). Vigilance-related IPBs were negatively associated with unwanted sex after controlling for drinking ( $b = -.052$ ,  $SE = .025$ , 95% CI  $[-.107, -.008]$ ). The IPB "Talking to people who know one's potential dating or sexual partner to find out what s/he is like" significantly moderated the drinking-unwanted sex relationship ( $b = -.009$ ,  $SE = .004$ , 95% CI  $[-.018, -.003]$ ). At above-average drinking levels, women who used this IPB more frequently reported fewer episodes of unwanted sex.

**Conclusion:** Findings revealed obtaining information about a potential partner significantly reduced the impact of drinking on unwanted sex for heavier drinkers. Future research examining how women implement this IPB may clarify its role in reducing unwanted sex.

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### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

An estimated 20% of college women experience sexual assault (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Krebs et al., 2011). Evidence suggests a significant proportion of the sexual assaults reported by young women occur in the context of dating relationships and may result from the misattribution of consent (Lim & Roloff, 1999). For example, men typically rely on nonverbal indicators of consent and may

misperceive friendly demeanor as a signal of consent when a woman does not actually consent to sex (Jozkowski & Wiersma, 2015). In addition, a woman's partner may erroneously assume that because she has consented to one sexual activity (e.g., oral sex), she also then consents to other forms of sex (e.g., vaginal intercourse; Harrington & Leitenberg, 1994). Misattribution of consent is more likely to occur when one or both individuals engage in high-risk drinking, as alcohol can significantly impair both a perpetrator's judgment and a victim's capacity to resist unwanted sexual advances (Abbey, 2002).

In recent years, nonconsensual sexual experiences have come to the forefront as an important public health issue. The CDC's 2011 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that nearly 1 in 10

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<sup>1</sup> Note: PB = protective behavior; IPB = interpersonal PB; APB = alcohol-based PB.

women over age 18 reported being involved in a sexual act when they were drunk, high, drugged, or passed out over a twelve-month period. It was noted that these women did not necessarily classify their experience as “rape,” although their reports were that the sex was unwanted (Breiding et al., 2014). In 2014, President Obama launched the *It's On Us* campaign to raise public awareness about sexual assault on college campuses. A major theme surrounding this initiative is the principle that if an individual does not or cannot consent to a sexual act, it is rape (Somanader, 2014). With this campaign has come a call to action to enhance existing interventions to more directly address consent and reduce unwanted sexual experiences.

Alcohol-based interventions primarily focus on strategies to reduce drinking but generally do not directly address contextual risk factors inherent in drinking situations (Scaglione et al., 2015). As a result, no single approach has been successful at reducing alcohol-related sexual consequences and unwanted sex (Larimer & Cronce, 2007; Mallett, Marzell, & Turrissi, 2011). Recent evidence suggests interpersonal protective behaviors (IPBs), because they are more inclined to address contextual factors (Scaglione et al., 2015), may be an effective tool for reducing alcohol-related sexual consequences (Mallett et al., 2015). What remains unclear is whether their efficacy depends on the specific sexual consequence and specific IPB examined, and to what extent IPBs attenuate the association between risky drinking and the specific sexual consequence. The present study used a prospective longitudinal design to examine these questions in a sample of female college student drinkers.

### 1.1. Drinking and unwanted sex

Heavy drinking predicts various sexual consequences in college females (Abbey, 2002; Scott-Sheldon, Senn, Carey, Urban, & Carey, 2013; Testa & Hoffman, 2012; Testa, Hoffman, & Livingston, 2010; Turner, Bauerle, & Shu, 2004). However, not all women drink heavily (Dawson, Grant, Stinson, & Chou, 2004), and not all heavy drinkers are at equal risk for sexual consequences (Scott-Sheldon, Carey, & Carey, 2010). Furthermore, it is unclear how drinking is related to unwanted sex in particular because unwanted sex can be operationalized numerous ways. The tendency has been to broadly define unwanted sex as any nonconsensual sexual contact, ranging from unwanted touching and kissing to unwanted oral, vaginal, or anal sex (Flack et al., 2007, 2008; Koss & Oros, 1982; Palmer, McMahon, Rounsaville, & Ball, 2010). Some critics argue unwanted sex should be defined in the manner that rape is traditionally defined, counting only those experiences that involve unwanted oral, vaginal, or anal penetration (Fisher, 2004). The current study defined unwanted sex as when an individual has any type of sex she really does not want when drinking. Drinking was defined as weekly drinking to include all drinker types (i.e., light, moderate, heavy).

### 1.2. Interpersonal protective behaviors, drinking, and unwanted sex

Protective behaviors (PBs) are harm reduction strategies employed before, during, or after drinking to lower one's risk of negative alcohol-related consequences (Palmer et al., 2010). For example, a woman may decide to pace her drinks before she arrives at a party. While at the party, she may alternate alcohol with non-alcoholic beverages. After leaving the party, she may call a taxi. Previous work has generally not distinguished between different types of PBs, but several studies have indicated the benefits of classifying PBs into alcohol-based PBs (APBs) and interpersonal PBs (IPBs; Mallett et al., 2015; Scaglione et al., 2015). APBs focus on controlling alcohol intake (e.g., pacing and limiting drinks), whereas IPBs are socially based, non-drinking strategies (e.g., walking home with a friend). Research suggests PBs can reduce sexual consequences in women (Lewis, Rees, Logan, Kaysen, & Kilmer, 2010; Palmer et al., 2010); however, most studies have examined APBs in conjunction with IPBs (Delva et al., 2004; Martens, Ferrier, &

Cimini, 2007; Martens et al., 2004). A recent study found IPBs, but not APBs, reduced alcohol-related sexual consequences measured as a composite score (Mallett et al., 2015). No published studies have examined whether specific IPBs, when drinking, may have stronger relationships with reduced unwanted sex. Understanding the role of specific IPBs in reducing specific sexual consequences may strengthen intervention efforts (Larimer & Cronce, 2007).

### 1.3. Current study

Previous examinations of unwanted sex have generally been cross-sectional. With cross-sectional designs, it is difficult to establish temporal order. For example, it is possible that unwanted sex precedes changes in drinking and IPBs. To ensure that drinking and IPB use preceded (and therefore predicted) unwanted sex, the present study employed a longitudinal design that followed participants for six months. Drinking and IPB use were measured at baseline. Unwanted sex was measured at a six-month follow-up.

The study had three aims (see Fig. 1). Aim 1 assessed whether drinking had a direct effect on unwanted sex (Path A). We hypothesize that individuals who drink more in a typical week will experience unwanted sex more frequently. Aim 2 assessed whether specific IPBs had direct effects on unwanted sex (Path B). We hypothesize to find an association between each IPB and unwanted sex, such that individuals who use a particular IPB more frequently will report fewer instances of unwanted sex. Finally, Aim 3 assessed whether specific IPBs reduced (i.e., moderated) the impact of drinking on unwanted sex (Path C). We hypothesize that the more frequently individuals use each IPB, the weaker the relationship between drinking and unwanted sex will become.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Recruitment and participants

Participants were randomly selected from the registrar's database of currently enrolled students at a large, public northeastern university and invited to participate in a study on drinking and PBs. Web-based surveys were administered in March (baseline) and September (follow-up) 2012. Data collection was timed to avoid overlap with spring break and the summer months in order to capture typical patterns of drinking and IPBs that occur during a college semester. Participants received a pre-notification letter and e-mail invitation containing a link and Personal Identification Number (PIN) for accessing the baseline survey. Up to three e-mail reminders were sent to those who did not complete the survey initially. The same procedures were used at follow-up. Participants were paid \$30 at baseline and \$15 at follow-up. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

As part of a larger study on college student risk behaviors, 900 students were invited, of which 508 (56%) completed the baseline survey. Of these, 191 participants (37.6%) identified as female drinkers and were included in the current study. At follow-up, retention was high (88%;  $n = 168$ ) and consistent with similar web-based approaches (Larimer et al., 2007; Turrissi et al., 2013). There was no evidence of attrition bias with respect to demographic variables, baseline drinking, or IPBs. At baseline, the women in the sample were, on average, 19.43 ( $SD = 0.98$ ) years old. A variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds were represented (7.9% Asian, 3.7% Black or African American, 5.3% multi-racial or other, and 5.2% Hispanic), although the majority (83.2%) were Caucasian. Approximately 17% reported sorority affiliation.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Unwanted sex

Unwanted sex was assessed at the six-month follow-up using an item adapted from the Young Adult Alcohol Problem Screening Test

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