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Social influences on substance-use behaviors of gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students: findings from a national study

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Abstract

A variety of social factors are expected to contribute to health behaviors among college students. The goal of this paper is to describe the relationships of two different aspects of the campus social environment, namely the campus resources for gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students and the campus-wide behavioral norms of substance use, to the individual substance-use behaviors of college students with same-sex experiences. Individual-level data come from 630 college students reporting same-sex experience, who were part of a national random sample returning questionnaires. Current cigarette smoking and binge drinking were examined. College-level data regarding the campus resources designed for GLB students were collected and used with campus-wide substance-use norms to predict individual substance use in logistic regression analyses. One-third to one-half of students reported current smoking and binge drinking, by sex and sex-partner category. The presence of GLB resources was inversely associated with women's smoking and directly associated with men's binge drinking behaviors. The proportion of students reporting same-sex behavior on campus was directly associated with these same outcomes, and behavioral norms were not associated with either outcome. Findings provide a glimpse into the influence of the social environment on the use of two of the most widely used substances at American colleges, and suggest that contextual approaches to explaining and controlling substance use may be important.

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Introduction

Recent research on substance-use behaviors among college students has suggested that cigarette smoking and alcohol use are widespread on American college campuses (Sax, 1997; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997; Wechsler, Dowdall, Maenner, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998a; Wechsler, Rigotti, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998b; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000; Rigotti, Lee, & Wechsler, 2000). While the overall

smoking rate among adults has decreased steadily over the past several decades, the prevalence of current (i.e. past 30 day) smoking among college students has risen recently (Sax, 1997; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997; Wechsler et al., 1998b; Rigotti et al., 2000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000). This is true despite the fact that smoking is much less common among college educated adults than among those with less education (Pamuk, Makuc, Heck, Reuben, & Lochner, 1998). Excessive alcohol use is also problematic among college students. One study found 44% of students reported binge drinking, and 23% engaged in this behavior frequently (Wechsler et al., 2000). Alcohol use was associated with a variety of academic, personal and social problems, including missing classes, having unprotected sex, driving while

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intoxicated, and generally “doing something you regret” (Wechsler et al., 1998a).

Very few studies have focused on gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) college students. The many studies of sexual behavior using college samples are typically too small to include a large enough number of GLB students to make valid comparisons to straight students. The large national studies of college students, by contrast, have not included the questions on sexual orientation or same-sex behaviors necessary to identify groups for comparison. Research on GLB adolescents and adults, however, indicates that substance use is more prevalent among GLBs than among heterosexuals (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; McKirnan & Peterson, 1989; National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1991; Cabaj, 1992; AMA, 1996; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998), though this disparity may be less than was previously estimated (Hughes & Eliason, 2002). Indeed, one recent study indicated that substance-use rates were similar for students with only same-sex partners and those with opposite-sex partners, but women with both male and female partners were more likely to smoke cigarettes, binge drink, and use marijuana than other female college students (Eisenberg & Wechsler, *in press*).

Cigarette smoking and alcohol use behaviors among US college students stem from a variety of factors occurring at multiple levels. Personal factors such as age, race and involvement with fraternities, sororities and college athletics have been shown to be associated with smoking and binge drinking among college students (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995a; Rigotti et al., 2000; Nelson & Wechsler, 2001). In a comprehensive review, Hughes and Eliason (2002) detail the many risk and protective factors which may be particularly useful in understanding substance use in GLB populations, including personal factors (such as social roles), social-psychological factors (such as stress), and interpersonal factors (such as peer and partner substance use). Little information exists, however, on the role of institutional or environmental factors which may also be influential to substance-use behaviors among GLBs.

Characteristics of the social sphere have been related to individual health behaviors and outcomes in a variety of domains (Amick, Levine, Tarlov, & Walsh, 1995; Yen & Syme, 1999; Berkman & Kawachi, 2000). In particular, a number of contextual variables describing the neighborhood context, local policies, pricing strategy, social climate of schools or geographic regions, or the behavioral norms of a reference group have been related to substance use among adolescents and adults (Harford & Grant, 1987; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1994; Karvonen & Rimpela, 1996; Beck & Treiman, 1996; Jones-Webb, Snowden, Herd, Short, & Hannan, 1997; Rountree & Clayton, 1999;

Wechsler, Lee, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Nelson, 2001a; Wechsler, Lee, & Rigotti, 2001b; Czart, Pacula, Chaloupka, & Wechsler, 2001). To our knowledge, this type of environmental variable has not been examined for substance use among GLB college students.

The current study, therefore, is an exploration of the association of two elements of the college social environment with cigarette smoking and binge drinking among GLB college students. In particular, this study examines campus resources for GLB students and the behavioral norms (i.e. campus-wide prevalence) of smoking and drinking. We hypothesize that (a) GLB¹ students at colleges with more comprehensive resources for GLBs will be less likely to use substances than their counterparts at colleges with fewer resources, and (b) GLB students at colleges where substance use is more prevalent among all students will be more likely to smoke and binge drink than those at colleges where use of these substances is less common.

Methods

College Alcohol Study (CAS) data set

Population, setting, data collection

This paper reports results from two data sources—individuals and colleges. Data come from the 1999 CAS, which used a nested random sampling strategy to survey students at American colleges and universities. One hundred and ninety-five institutions were randomly selected from a list of accredited 4-year colleges provided by the American Council on Education. The sample was selected using probability proportionate to the size of undergraduate enrollment at each institution. One hundred and forty colleges participated in the first survey in 1993, 130 participated in the 1997 follow-up, and 128 participated in the 1999 follow-up. The main reason for colleges' non-participation was administrators' inability to provide student contact information within the time parameters of the study.

Administrators at each participating college provided a random sample of 225 full-time undergraduate students. Self-administered 20-page questionnaires were mailed directly to students at the 128 participating colleges in February, March, and April 1999. Reminder postcards and surveys were also sent. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and encouraged by a cash incentive. The average college response rate was 60%, but varied among the participating colleges (range = 49–83%). To be included in the final CAS sample of colleges

¹ Note that although the term “gay, lesbian, and bisexual” or “GLB” will be used to refer to the group of students in this study reporting same-sex experience, these students have not self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

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