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A Comparison of Drinking Behavior Between Heterosexual and Gay, Lesbian and
Bisexual College Students: An Examination of Prevalence and Contributing Factors

By

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A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Pace University

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Dedication

I wish to dedicate my dissertation to my best friend, partner, and husband, Marco Pirozzi, who has seen me through every peak and valley in graduate school. He was there with infinite love and support whenever I was ready to give up, to remind me that I still had just enough in me to pull through. When the time came to celebrate my achievements, he was my biggest fan and always reminded me of how proud I should be of myself. He truly was my “rally monkey.”

I also wish to dedicate my dissertation to my friends and family, who always had confidence in my abilities and an appreciation for the challenges I faced. They helped me remember that life is not put on hold during graduate school. I want to thank them for their patience, love and support. Each one of them has made a unique contribution to my growth and development as a person and a psychologist. In particular, I would like to thank the Pirozzi’s for taking me in as their own and always putting family before everything else. Finally, I would like to thank my Uncle Charlie and Aunt Janet Spinardi for being much more than an uncle and aunt and keeping my roots alive.

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Abstract

Psychological research has indicated that the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth population is at higher risk for a number of mental health problems, including depression, suicide, and substance abuse (American Psychological Association [APA], “Guidelines,” n.d.; Gonsiorek, 1988; Hart & Heimberg, 2001; Hicks, 2000; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Morrison & L’Heureux, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994). As homosexuality has been largely marginalized and condemned within society, youth who are developing an LGB identity may face challenges in addition to the regular developmental tasks of adolescence (Browning, 1987; Gonsiorek, 1988). While many studies have uncovered a higher incidence of substance abuse in the LGB community, compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Boyd, McCabe & d’Arcy, 2003; Olson, 2000), few researchers have explored alcohol use within the LGB college population, who might be at particular risk as they cope with their emerging sexual identity (Erikson, 1963, 1974) within the larger culture of the university where drinking is often prevalent.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the differences between the incidence of alcohol use and drinking problems between heterosexual and LGB college students. This study also explored a variety of factors that were hypothesized to affect drinking behavior, such as internalized homophobia (self-loathing about one’s homosexual behaviors or identity), positive alcohol expectancies, the perceived experience of stress, and shame-proneness (a tendency to make negative attributions to oneself). The sample consisted of 294 undergraduate students (75% reported being

exclusively heterosexual, or attracted mostly to the opposite sex; 25% reported being exclusively homosexual, or having mostly same-sex attraction.)

Results indicated that LGB college students drank significantly more frequently in the month prior to this study and experienced significantly more alcohol-related consequences than their heterosexual peers. The researcher hypothesized that the experience of perceived stress would predict drinking behavior, and that positive expectancies of drinking would moderate the stress-drinking relationship. Additionally, it was hypothesized that shame-proneness would be a significant predictor of drinking frequency and alcohol consequences, and that internalized homophobia would predict drinking behavior among LGB students. However, contrary to the hypotheses, results indicated that none of the examined variables, including stress, shame-proneness or positive drinking expectancies, were significant predictors of drinking frequency in the complete sample, and that internalized homophobia was not a predictor of drinking among LGB participants.

The results of the current study confirm previous findings that LGB individuals may be at greater risk for substance use and problems than heterosexual individuals, and additionally, indicates that this trend occurs not only in adult populations, but in a young-adult, college population, as well. This suggests that information about sexuality and drinking behavior might be particularly relevant for mental health providers to identify youth at risk, and/or to target individuals for preventative services. Additionally, the results of the current study suggest that much more research is needed to identify additional variables that effect and explain the LGB youth risk for substance use.

Chapter I

Introduction

Adolescence and young adulthood are developmental periods, which include many tasks critical to autonomy, peer and intimate relationships, identity formation, and specifically, the emergence of sexual identity (Erikson, 1963, 1974). For lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, this period may be particularly difficult as they become aware of their sexual preference and begin to identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual; identities that are marginalized and often condemned within our society at large (Browning, 1987). Most young adults often have little or no exposure to LGB (lesbian, gay and bisexual) role models, or even worse, have been exposed to negative views of homosexuality, which can make the process of homosexual identity development difficult and frightening for them. As a result, the normal developmental tasks of adolescence become more challenging for LGB youth, which puts them at a much greater risk for experiencing difficulty in identity formation, rejection of their identity by family and society, loss of social support, and in turn, potentially serious emotional distress and mental health problems (Browning, 1987; Gonsiorek, 1988). It is accepted throughout the literature that there is a higher risk for many problems including substance abuse, suicide and emotional difficulties among LGB youth, most likely mediated by the stress associated with possessing a marginalized identity and loss of support (American Psychological Association [APA], "Guidelines," n.d.; Gonsiorek, 1988; Hart & Heimberg, 2001; Hicks, 2000; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Previously, psychologists understood the higher incidence of mental health problems within the LGB community as caused by "deviant" sexuality (APA, "Guidelines," n.d.). While homosexuality was previously classified as a personality

disorder in the first and second versions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-I, 1952; DSM-II, 1972), APA resolved to de-pathologize homosexuality (Congers, 1975) and it was removed from the diagnostic classification system with the publication of the DSM-III (1980). Since then, the APA has passed a number of resolutions to: promote equal rights for LGB individuals, support the repeal of all anti-gay discriminatory legislation (1975), support equal-opportunity employment rights for LGB teachers (1981), oppose the Department of Defense's ban on gays in the military (1991), and promote appropriate psychological treatment for LGB clients (1997) (APA, "Policy Statements on Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Concerns," n.d.). Additionally, in 1990, the APA joined forces the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to create a joint resolution supporting equal access to education and safe school environments for LGB students (APA, 1993). They also promoted funding for HIV and harm reduction programs for LGB students to address growing concerns about risk-taking behavior in this population.

Several authors have attempted to explain the difference between the prevalence of alcohol use in the heterosexual and gay communities. Several hypotheses have been postulated; the hypotheses that internalized homophobia (i.e., self-loathing and lack of self-acceptance), gay-related stress (e.g., including physical and verbal assault, discrimination), and the importance of the "gay bar" as a primary socialization location have all received mixed support in the literature (Amadio & Chung, 2004; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; McKirnan & Peterson, 1989; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004).

While many studies indicate higher incidence of substance abuse in the LGB community (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Boyd, McCabe & d'Arcy, 2003; Olson,

2000), few studies have looked exclusively at alcohol use within one population (i.e., LGB college students) that might be at the most risk. The risk for this subgroup within the LGB population is likely elevated, as they are experiencing confusion, conflict and stress related to the sexual identity formation and coming out processes, while simultaneously residing within a larger culture (of the university) where drinking is often prevalent and normative.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the differences between the incidence of alcohol use and drinking problems between heterosexual and homosexual (including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning) college students. This study also explored a variety of factors that might contribute to this difference, including the experience of stress, internalized homophobia, and drinking expectancies, as well as shame-proneness, which has not yet been examined in the LGB population.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Adolescent Identity Development and Unique Challenges for LGB Youth

As teenagers face the regular developmental tasks of adolescence, including “changing relationships with parents, development of peer and community support, exploring career/vocational goals, and establishing intimate relationships” (Browning, 1987, p. 47), LGB youth are additionally developing a sexual identity that has been marginalized and condemned by much of society. As youth develop and integrate their homosexual behavior or longings with their identity, they are forced to call many of the values they grew up with into question; the anger and cynicism related to the typical adolescent questioning of his or her parents’ values may be much more intense for LGB youth. These adolescents also face the fear of rejection of their emerging identity by their family and friends; identity foreclosure may occur if the fear is so overwhelming that the person avoids further exploration of their homosexual identity and conforms to their family’s values.

Browning (1987) also discusses the developmental task of “coming out,” or revealing one’s sexuality, which is a part of the process of identity formation, but is unique to LGB youth. A great source of stress for the LGB youth is the feeling of a need to stay “in the closet,” withholding one’s true self from others, or risk rejection of one’s identity. Experiences of rejection in response to one’s coming out may cause the LGB youth to again experience confusion about his or her identity and self-worth.

Another important developmental task of adolescence that LGB youth have unique difficulties with is the increasing importance of peer relationships. One problem