

Research In Brief

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Gender differences in high-risk situations for drinking: Are they mediated by depressive symptoms?

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This study examined gender differences in the frequency of high-risk drinking situations and the extent to which depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between gender and heavy drinking.

Findings

- Alcohol dependent women experienced more depressive symptoms than alcohol dependent men.
- Alcohol dependent men were more likely to have a history of prior treatment for alcohol problems than were alcohol dependent women.
- Depressed women (but not men) drink more in response to situations involving unpleasant emotions and conflict with others.

Background

Other studies have examined whether there are gender differences for drinking in high-risk situations, the precipitants of relapse episodes, the role of negative emotional states or social pressures on heavy drinking, and the association between depression and alcohol use disorders.

This study had two primary objectives:

- to address mixed findings in previous studies regarding gender differences in the frequency of heavy drinking in various high-risk situations; and
- to test the extent to which depressive symptoms help explain

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Predictors of risky sexual behavior with new and regular partners in a sample of women bar drinkers

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This study assessed risky sexual behavior by women who drink in bars, as well as differences in individual and contextual characteristics that predicted risky sexual behavior with regular and new sexual partners.

Findings

- Rates of risky sexual behavior were significantly higher with regular partners compared with new partners.
- Increased risky sexual behavior with *new* partners was significantly associated with having had a riskier regular partner in the past six months, lower sexually transmitted disease (STD)/pregnancy prevention assertiveness, increased expectations of sexual disinhibition when drinking, a greater history of prior sexual risk taking and more frequent drinking in bars.
- Increased risky sexual behavior with a *regular* partner was significantly associated with being older, the use of oral contraceptives, lower assertiveness for STD/pregnancy prevention assertiveness, a greater history of prior sexual risk taking and increased drug use.

Background

The bar environment sets the stage for casual sexual encounters, perhaps more so than many other drinking contexts, through the more permissive social expectations of the patrons. Given their high levels of alcohol consumption and their view of bars as a venue for finding romantic or sexual partners, women bar drinkers are likely to be at higher risk for engaging in risky sexual behaviors. In this study, women who reported drinking in bars

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Gender differences in high-risk situations for drinking (cont'd)

the relationship between gender and drinking in high-risk situations.

The Study

Participants in the study were 143 individuals (91 men) seeking outpatient treatment for a drinking problem. Upon evaluation, each met diagnostic criteria for alcohol dependence. The average age was 39 years. The majority were white (75 percent) or African American (20%). Nearly half were single (45 percent); 28 percent were married, 22 percent were divorced or separated, and four percent were in a cohabiting relationship. Most were employed, full time (41 percent) or part time (15 percent); one third was unemployed (34 percent). Participants reported drinking an average of 7.5 drinks per drinking day and 65 percent of the sample reported prior treatment for an alcohol problem. Participants were administered the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) to determine the severity of depressive symptoms, and the Inventory of Drug-Taking Situations (IDT; Annis & Martin, 1985) (alcohol version) to assess the client's substance use across eight categories of high-risk situations (e.g., unpleasant emotions, interpersonal conflict, social pressure to use, etc.).

Discussion of Findings

Consistent with previous studies, these researchers found differences between alcohol dependent men and women in high-risk situations for heavy drinking. Women were more likely than men to engage in heavy drinking when experiencing unpleasant emotions and conflict with others.

Depressive symptoms (assessed by the BDI-II) served as a significant intervening variable between gender and alcohol consumption in high-risk situations, especially those involving unpleasant emotions or conflict with others. Women's depression scores significantly predicted their drinking in these situations; men's depression scores did not. These findings are consistent with previous research which show a stronger link between alcohol and depression for women, compared to men.

Implications

The current findings could have important implications for the treatment of women with alcohol dependence. Relapse prevention-based treatment might be geared to address unpleasant emotions and conflict with others as salient triggers to alcohol use and to help clients learn to anticipate and effectively cope with these situations without drinking.

Treatment programs for alcohol dependent women might integrate components that target potential deficits in the ability to cope with unpleasant emotions and conflict with others. Training in basic communication skills and conflict resolution

skills may help women to manage problematic social interactions and thereby lessen the occurrence of interpersonal conflict as a precipitant for heavy drinking.

These findings underscore the importance of assessing and treating depressive symptoms in alcohol-dependent women. Depressive symptoms significantly explained gender differences in high-risk drinking situations, pointing to the importance of affective issues in alcohol-dependent women seeking treatment.

Limitations

- The higher level of depressive symptoms observed in the present study among alcohol dependent women, compared to alcohol dependent men, may reflect a self-report bias, or a greater willingness by women to report depressive symptoms.
- The participants in this study met criteria for alcohol dependence and were seeking treatment. These results, therefore, may not generalize to problem drinkers who are not seeking treatment or to individuals who are mandated to treatment by the legal system (e.g., due to a Driving Under the Influence [D.U.I.] infraction).
- Results from this study cannot be used to derive inferences about cause and effect. Specifically, depression may be a *cause* of unpleasant emotions and drinking, a *result* of drinking, or a product of other unmeasured factors. Studies that follow individuals after they enter and complete substance abuse treatment are needed in order to identify causal relationships among unpleasant emotions, depression, and drinking.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating differences between men and women in high-risk situations for heavy drinking and sheds light on an underlying factor that may explain these differences. Findings support depressive symptoms serving as a mediator of the relationship between gender and drinking in response to negative emotions and interpersonal conflict. This investigation constitutes an important contribution toward understanding gender differences in drinking that may impact treatment efficacy in general and alcohol relapse in particular.

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References

- Annis, H., & Martin, G. (1985). Inventory of Drug-Taking Situations (IDTS-50), Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
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Predictors of risky sexual behavior (cont'd)

on a weekly basis were perceived to be at high risk for engaging in increased sexual activity, particularly with casual partners, as well as at increased risk for unprotected sexual activity (i.e., non-condom use) whether with new or regular partners, when drinking or using drugs.

The study had two primary goals:

- to describe rates of drinking, other substance use and risky sexual behavior of women bar drinkers; and
- to assess differences in the situational factors that predicted risky sexual behavior with regular and new sexual partners among a sample of women bar drinkers.

The Study

Participants in the study were 241 women who reported being weekly bar drinkers and were between the ages of 18 and 30. Each took part in a comprehensive, face-to-face interview at RIA about their substance use and social and sexual behaviors. All interviews were conducted by trained female interviewers. Interviews were extensive, covering historical and current information, demographics, history of victimization (childhood, adolescent, and adult physical and sexual), physical and psychological health and symptoms, substance use and misuse, bar drinking practices and behavior, sexual history, sexual assertiveness, alcohol-related expectancies and risky sexual behavior.

Participants were, on average, 22 years of age. Eighty percent of the women were white; 9 percent were black. Fifty-one percent of the women reported having some college education and 33 percent were college graduates. Fourteen percent reported having a high school education. A majority (62 percent) of the women reported working part time and 61 percent were students.

Discussion of Findings

One in four women (25 percent) reported engaging in consensual intercourse with a man they had met in a bar the same night and an average of 2.3 times in their lifetimes. Among this group, nearly half of these women (49 percent) reported engaging in this risky behavior (i.e., casual sex) in the past year. Seventeen percent reported being moderately intoxicated and 78 percent reported being very intoxicated when they engaged in this behavior. Women defined a regular sexual partner as a man they had known for an average of eight weeks.

Women reported drinking in bars, on average, more than twice each week and consuming five drinks per occasion. In addition, women reported being more likely to have contact with men and to call attention to themselves after drinking their usual number of drinks in a bar. Among those women who reported using illicit drugs, the most frequently used drug was marijuana (75 percent).

Heavy episodic drinking was the norm while drinking in bars and casual forms of risky sexual behavior associated with the bar environment (i.e., consensual sexual intercourse with a man met that same night) were reported by a notable proportion of women.

Type of partner, either regular or new, impacted risky sexual behavior. Risky sexual behavior, defined as sexual intercourse without the use of a condom, was higher with regular partners.

Women who used oral contraceptives were significantly less likely to use a condom with a regular partner. Lower sexual assertiveness about STD/pregnancy prevention also decreased the likelihood of condom use with a regular partner. Drinking in bars and the amount of alcohol consumed did not influence the likelihood of condom use with a regular partner. However, having used a greater number of illicit drugs over the past year was associated with decreased condom use with a regular partner.

Oral contraceptive use did not influence condom use with a new partner. However, lower sexual assertiveness about STD/pregnancy sexual assertiveness, and greater expectancy of sexual disinhibition when drinking, did decrease condom use with a new partner. Greater history of sexual risk-taking was significantly associated with decreased condom use with a new sexual partner. The more often a woman went to bars in a month, the less likely she was to use a condom with a new partner.

Implications

- Prevention programs should include a range of variables to increase awareness of the role of substance use, drinking contexts and partner type on the likelihood of using condoms. The emphasis on drug use before sexual activity and its influence on increasing sexually risky behaviors should be emphasized.
- Skill-building exercises aimed at increasing women's sexual assertiveness associated with STD prevention (i.e., condom use) should be stressed as important, particularly with regular partners.

Limitations

The measures of substance use and risky sexual behavior with new and regular partners were provided through retrospective self-reports. Although this is the standard manner in which these types of data are collected, they may be subject to some degree of recall bias.

This sample of women was not a randomly selected group of women bar drinkers but rather, a voluntary sample of women who reported drinking in bars on a weekly basis. These findings may not generalize to all women or to all women bar drinkers.

Predictors of risky sexual behavior (cont'd)

Conclusion

Among young women who regularly drink in bars, sexual risk-taking was significantly higher with regular partners than with new partners. The predictors of risky sexual behavior differed based on partner type. These findings have implications for including information about the role of alcohol, drinking context, and drug use, as well as individual difference characteristics and partner type in targeted prevention strategies to reduce sexual risk-taking.

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