Examining the Relationship Between Greek Life Membership and Alcohol-Related Negative Consequences

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Abstract

There has long been a concern about alcohol use and abuse on U.S. college campuses (Sher, Bartholow, & Nanda, 2001). Results from a large, nationally representative sample indicate that 44% of college students engage in binge drinking (i.e., heavy episodic alcohol consumption; Wechsler et al., 1995). Furthermore, it is also well documented that students in social Greek organizations consume more alcohol than non-members (Engs & Hanson Engs, Kraft, & Kaplan, cited by Haworth-Hoeppner et al., 1989). For example, 43.6% of non-Greek students compared to 19.3% of fraternity and sorority members, reported no alcohol use in the past 30 days (Alva, 1998); and as many as 47% of those residing in a Greek house reported themselves as heavy drinkers, compared to 14% among students at large (Haworth-Hoeppner et al., 1989 cited by Danielson, Taylor, & Hartford, 2001). The purpose of the current study was to extend the literature on Greek member and alcohol consumption by examining the complex relationship between affiliation with a Greek social organization and negative alcohol-related consequences. The study included 254 participants with an average age of 20.36, from a public, mid-sized, midwestern university. Participants were recruited using email listservs for the online study. On average, Greek members drink more days per week, consume more drinks on a typical drinking day, and have higher peak drinking occasions in the past 30 days. Furthermore, Greek members reported more than twice the number of the alcohol consequences than non-Greeks. In short, Greek members drink significantly more alcohol, drink more frequently, and experience more consequences than non-Greek members. This significant relationship provides important implications for Greek life participation and its strong association with binge drinking. Moreover, these findings may help foster a more thorough and concrete understanding of the causes underlying the frequency and intensity of negative alcohol-related consequences in the Greek community.

Keywords: Alcohol, Consequences, Greek

1. Introduction

It is well documented that binge drinking is a significant problem on college campuses across the United States. In the past 20 years, several studies have been dedicated to the phenomenon, and its notoriety continues to grow as its prevalence increases. Binge drinking (also known as HED or heavy episodic drinking) has been defined by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) as a pattern of alcohol consumption which brings the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 gram percent and above. This BAC typically corresponds to consumption of five or more drinks in two hours for males and four or more drinks in two hours for females (Sher, Bartholow, & Nanda, 2001).

  Data from several studies indicated that the highest proportion of heavy drinkers and individuals with diagnosable alcohol-use disorders and multiple substance dependencies are in the age range encompassing over 90% of all enrolled college students, the majority of these individuals being between the ages of 18 and 21 (Grant, 1997;

O'Malley & Johnston, 2002 cited by Turrisi, Mallett, Mastroleo, & Larimer, 2006). In addition, previous literature has reported that college students are more likely to engage in binge drinking than other individuals in the same age group (Bennett, Miller, & Woodall, 1999 cited by Cho, 2006). With extensive research indicating higher prevalence of heavy episodic drinking among college students, it is evident that the problems associated with heavy episodic drinking predominate the college campus.

The key to shaping prevention strategies for college student problem drinkers is recognizing the factors that consistently relate to persistent, alcohol abuse (Sher, Bartholow, & Nanda, 2001). In doing so, prevention programs can be effectively constructed around the principal causes of the problem. One such factor that has received considerable attention is binge drinking among those affiliated with a Greek social organization (Sher, Bartholow, & Nanda, 2001). Although there is a broad variance of drinking frequencies within both the Greek and non-Greek populations, it is well documented that there is a relationship between Greek membership and intensity of drinking (Danielson, Taylor, & Hartford, 2001). In fact, members of fraternities and sororities are among the heaviest drinkers on campus (Larimer, Anderson, Baer, & Marlatt, 2000). Since Strauss and Bacon's classic study in 1953, numerous studies have documented that members of the Greek system are more likely to be drinkers than their non-Greek peers, consume more alcohol than other drinkers on campus, are more often "heavy" or "problem" drinkers, and report more "binge-drinking" than other students (Cashin et al., 1998; Engs et al., 1996; Haworth-Hoeppner et al., 1989; Klein , 1989; Lo and Globetti, 1995; Tampke, 1990; Weschler et al., 1995 cited by Danielson, Taylor, & Hartford, 2001). Moreover, fraternities in particular have received considerable attention for their association with alcohol consumption. Responsible for a substantial portion of campus events at which alcohol is available to students, fraternity parties have become a large part of how college itself is portrayed (DeSimone, 2009).

Unfortunately, with the excessive use of alcohol, is often related to negative consequences. Given that college students have higher rates of past-month alcohol use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007 cited by Grant, LaBrie, Hummer, & Lac, 2011) and binge drinking (Dawson, Grant, Stinson, & Chou, 2004; SAMHSA, 2007; Slutske, 2005 cited by Grant et al., 2011) than their peers, this has become cause for concern on U.S. college campuses. According to Correia, Carey, Simmons, & Borsari (2003), students who binge drink are seven to ten times more likely to than non-binge drinkers to participate in unsafe sexual practices, suffer or cause physical injury, or drive while intoxicated. In addition to what may arise while intoxicated, long-term negative consequences of drinking such as poor classroom performance, legal problems, loss of social relationships, and financial difficulties cannot necessarily offset what may be more immediate expectations for drinking (Elias et al., 1996). Research indicates that college student populations are at particular risk for heavy episodic drinking and alcohol-related harm (Johnston, 0'Malley, & Bachman, 1999 cited by Mallett, & Geisner, 2004), with members of Greek letter organizations at even greater risk (Alva, 1998 cited by Mallett & Geisner, 2004). Furthermore, occasional binge drinkers are 5 times more likely to experience 5 or more alcohol-related problems and frequent binge drinkers are 22 times as likely to do so (Wechsler et al., 1998 cited by Danielson, Taylor, & Hartford, 2001).

The majority of previous research on binge drinking has been dedicated to identifying the origin of alcohol-related problems in the general college population, and utilizing such findings to construct the appropriate alcohol abuse prevention programs. Extensive research has also been conducted on the relationship between Greek membership and alcohol abuse to construct intervention strategies specific to those in fraternities and sororities on college campuses. However, little research has been done to examine the relationship between Greek membership and alcohol-related negative consequences. The purpose of the current study is to extend the literature and determine not only if members of the Greek community differ from nonmembers with respect to alcohol consumption, but also with respect to alcohol-related negative consequences.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 254 students (73 males, 177 females) with an average age of 20.36 (SD = XX) from a public, mid-sized, Midwestern university. One hundred seven Greek members, seven planning to pledge a fraternity or sorority, and 134 non-members participated in the survey. Of those who participated, 90.2% were Caucasian, 3% were Asian, 4% were African American, and 2% were Hispanic. This was somewhat representative of the ethnic distribution of the campus as whole, in which 85% were Caucasian.

2.2. procedure

Participants were recruited via email invitations for entrance into a drawing to win one of ten $50 gift cards. Before administering the surveys, methods were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. demographics

Participants indicated the following demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, family income, grade point average, and Greek membership.

2.3.2. alcohol consumption

Participants were provided with a definition of a standard drink prior to answering questions concerning their alcohol consumption. A standard drink is defined as a 12 oz bottle of beer at 5% alcohol per volume, a 5 oz glass of wine at 12% alcohol per volume, and a 1.5 oz shot of liquor at 40% per volume. Participants were then asked to indicate the following: 1) how many days per week they have at least one alcoholic drink, 2) how many drinks they have on a typical day when drinking, and 3) the highest number of drinks they had on one occasion within the last 30 days.

2.3.3. Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI)

The Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (White & Labouvie, 1989) evaluates the frequency and severity of alcohol-related problems. Students were asked to indicate the occurrence of 23 items representing alcohol's role in personal, social, and academic functioning over the past year using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never)* to 4 *(more than ten times)*. For example, when students are asked, "how many times has this happened to you while you were drinking or because of your drinking during the last year?" they must then use the Likert-type scale to rate the frequency on a response such as—"Not able to do your homework or study for a test" (White & Labouvie, 1989). For the current sample, the RAPI had a Cronbach's alpha = .92, M = 8.85, and SD = 10.30 (White & Labouvie, 1989).

3. Results

A series of independent t-tests compared Greek members to non-members across alcohol consumption variables. With respect to the Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index, Greek members (M = 12.73, SD = 12.19) had significantly more alcohol problems than non-Greeks (M = 5.97, SD = 7.61), $t(192)$ = 4.74, $p < .001$. Greek members (M = 2.57, SD = 1.04) also indicated that they drank on more days of the week than non-Greeks (M = 1.33, SD = 1.35), $t(192)$ = 7.79, $p < .001$, and on a typical day when drinking, Greeks (M = 5.45, SD = 2.68) had significantly more drinks than non-Greeks (M = 3.46, SD = 2.87), $t(192)$ = 7.79, $p < .001$. During the past 30 days, Greeks (M = 8.94, SD = 5.25) reported consuming significantly more drinks on any one occasion than non-Greeks (M = 5.07, SD = 4.61), $t(192)$ = 7.79, $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

The hypothesis relating binge drinking and alcohol-related negative consequences to Greek membership was supported in the current study. In a typical week, members of the Greek community consumed alcohol on more days of the week, had more drinks on a typical day when drinking, and reported a higher number of drinks on their peak drinking occasion from the past 30 days. Not only do the results indicate that Greek members consume more alcohol in a given week than non-Greeks, but also experience significantly more alcohol-related negative consequences than their counterparts. This correlation was consistent with the results of previous studies reporting

that as the number of days drinking increased, those obtaining a high score on the Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI) increased dramatically (Elias et al., 1996).

Despite research documenting heavier drinking among members of the Greek system, there has been limited research surrounding the possible mechanisms of the phenomenon. In order to develop effective prevention techniques for this population, it is important to acknowledge the context of drinking and the unique characteristics of those among the Greek system. Whether an individual's genetic predisposition toward alcohol abuse is predictive of the decision to become Greek, or whether the Greek system significantly influences the drinking habits of those involved, it is difficult to tell (Larimer, Anderson, Baer, & Marlatt, 2000). Although previous literature has conjectured about which mechanisms hold influence, additional research could be done to determine the extent of influence that each mechanism holds over drinking habits. With a grasp on the mechanisms for alcohol abuse, further research may result in a more thorough understanding of the negative consequences associated with binge drinking.

However, there were some limitations to the current study. Given that the all of the participants came from one college campus (with a higher than average Greek population), it is difficult to generalize the results of the study. It is also likely that some of the participants left questions blank or did not answer all the questions accurately in an effort to finish quickly. With the incentive of winning a $50 gift card, some may have been more interested in the idea of the money, rather than the study itself.

The significant relationship between Greek affiliation and alcohol-related consequences provides important implications for Greek life participation and its strong association with binge drinking. Moreover, these findings may help foster a more thorough and concrete understanding of the causes underlying the frequency and intensity of binge drinking and its outcomes within the Greek community.

5. Acknowledgments

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