

Gender role expectations as a mediating pathway to increased alcohol use among homosexual women and heterosexual women

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Introduction

Research involving substance abuse among sexual minority women is growing in frequency and experimental studies are becoming increasingly more consistent, mostly agreeing that substance abuse in sexual minority adults is markedly higher than in their heterosexual counterparts. Evidence found by Hughes, Szalacha & McNair has shown that sexual minority women of all subgroups studied showed an increase of substance abuse across all measures compared with heterosexual women. The work these researchers completed was one of the very few studies of its kind.

Sexual minority women are also highly likely to experience higher effects of a mediating variable that leads to substance abuse compared with heterosexual women, as is the case with stress. Perceived stress can also be seen as the most significant risk factor of binge drinking among sexual minority women and these findings evidence the application of minority stress theory for sexual minorities (Hughes, Szalacha & McNair, 2010).

By examining the relationship between sexual minorities, discrimination and substance use largely using the minority stress model as support, another team found that around half of all LGB adults who reported experiencing discrimination also were found to meet criterion for substance abuse disorders within the last year (McCabe, Bostwick, Hughes, West & Boyd, 2010).

More research is available on the health behaviors of gay men specifically, especially surrounding the risk factors that increase likelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS, including social

behaviors and substance use. Hamilton and Mahalik found that gay men who adopt more traditional behaviors exhibiting masculinity also were more likely to engage in aforementioned risky health behaviors and supported a large selection of previous research regarding gay men. One supporting factor being that traditional masculinity is associated with higher rates of physical and psychological health problems in gay men. It is suggested that pressure to conform to traditionally masculine roles increased health risk behaviors through stress experienced by gay men in this study (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009).

Finding existing research regarding gender role expectations of lesbian women proves to be difficult. Further research involving lesbian women includes possibilities of targeted substance abuse treatment programs where causes of substance abuse are thought to be social rejection and emotional abuse but gender expectations are not discussed (Stevens, 2012).

Traditionally masculine behavior or masculine identity has been found to be a common predictor of binge drinking, supporting the idea that gender identity plays a key part in alcohol abuse. After studying 422 college students, Peralta, Steele, Nofziger & Rickles suggest that college aged students depend on alcohol use as a way to express their gender identity conspicuously. While promising, this study did not propose any additional theories relating to gender role expectations or sexual orientation and the students' alcohol use.

Due to the lack of research pertaining to lesbian woman and alcohol use through mediating variables other than discrimination compared with a wealth of research on the health behaviors and risk factors of gay men, we found it pertinent to propose additional research into risk factors for alcohol abuse in lesbian women. To understand these risk factors better, we asked the question: How do gender role expectations impact alcohol use in homosexual women and heterosexual women? After examining similar research in this area we expect to find that

homosexual women will show increased alcohol use with higher gender role pressure compared to heterosexual women.

Methods

Participants

In this study we intend to recruit roughly 250 female college age students, roughly 18 to 35 years, from 5 universities throughout the United States. They will be recruited through campus approved advertising posted throughout the different campuses and include an opt-in email box for participation in the study. Recruiting enough participants whom identify as a sexual minority has been shown in previous studies to be difficult compared with heterosexual participants and we expect the recruitment process to take an extended period of time to get a large enough sample.

Measurements

Participants will be asked to complete a personal questionnaire that identifies alcohol use behaviors and attitudes towards alcohol use. They will also be asked to respond to the BEM Sex Role Inventory questionnaire to determine personal behaviors as more typically masculine or feminine. The BSRI is a commonly used questionnaire with high internal validity for measuring typically masculine or feminine behaviors. An additional survey is being constructed to measure perceived expectations of individuals close to participants, romantic partners, friends, family and peers, that is modelled after the modified benevolent sexism scale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory used by Fitz and Zucker (2015).

Expected Results

What we expect to see is a trend in increased alcohol use among homosexual women with increased social pressures and influences compared with heterosexual women. We suggest that minority stress may cause an increase in feelings of needing to conform to gender role expectations as an attempt of either hiding their sexuality before coming out, or to prevent from attracting negative attention after coming out.

Discussion & Implications

Further research surrounding the specific stressors that lead to alcohol abuse among sexual minorities is necessary to build better tailored intervention and prevention programs for these groups. While existing research continues to suggest that masculine roles and expectations cause an increase in substance use, especially with gay men, little research has explored the stressors caused by gender role expectations for lesbian women. This study aimed to reveal higher pressures to conform to traditional gender roles among lesbian women also cause an increase in substance use.

Research on habits of sexual minority adults consistently suggests increased substance use compared with their heterosexual counterparts. Continuing to research why there is a significant increase in use and abuse among this group will help create more pathways to providing them with the health care and support that they are currently lacking. Examining how gender role expectations affect sexual minority women may reveal new mediating variables that were not considered in previous research and suggest potential for causes that are easier to manipulate with targeted treatments.

Limitations of this study include a small demographic of participants in both region and age. Using university students is a common avenue for ease of access to research participants, however, tends to limit the average age of a participant, including other demographics like SES. This study cannot, therefore, reflect the behaviors and alcohol use of non-college students and not necessarily that of lower SES adults. Additionally, this study only looks at the behaviors and habits of lesbian women compared with heterosexual women, limiting the amount of sexual minority women who have different sexual identities, like bisexual, queer, or transgender women. Other studies have divided LGBTQ participants into further subgroups and found evidence that bisexual women exhibited the highest increase in substance use among all groups, suggesting that there are groups within the LGBTQ community that require more research and increased prevention and intervention (Hughes, Szalacha & McNair, 2010).

References

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