

Gender Differences in Campus Drug Use Patterns and Problems

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In every issue of Insights, NOSAPP features the writing of a prominent researcher in the prevention field.

What is the impact of gender on collegiate alcohol and other drug use? Is it an important factor to consider in intervention and prevention efforts designed to reduce abuse on campus? The short answers to these questions are that gender influences do, indeed, play a very large role in the nature of student drug use and that any programmatic efforts must consider their basic gender difference, whether researching and assessing student needs, designing policies, intervening in peer problems, or conducting counseling. More complete answers demand a more detailed consideration of the many issues that arise when comparing men's and women's drinking and other drug use in the campus context. This article provides an overview of these gender differences and their implications.

At the most basic level it is simple enough to say that male students abuse drugs more heavily than female students on campuses. In virtually all research on college populations males report considerably higher levels of alcohol consumption and associated negative consequences (see reviews by Berkowitz and Perkins, 1987; and Engs and Hanson, 1989) and in most instances report higher levels of other drug use as well. This consistent gender difference, in many ways, simply parallels gender differences found in American society at large. The higher risk usage by undergraduate males in comparison with females is associated with significant differences in gender socialization and the internalization of sex role expectations and identities (Chomak and Collins, 1987). Males are encouraged to consume more heavily and earlier in age as part of adoles-

cent initiation processes. Greater risk-taking and deviant activities are often encouraged, if not expected, as part of the adolescent and young adult male role. In contrast, females are traditionally expected to exhibit more restrained behavior that does not jeopardize their public image.

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Deviance is much less acceptable for women, be it in the form of public intoxication or possession of illicit drugs.

In recent years some speculation has emerged about the possible disappearance of these gender differences in drug use as changing gender roles in society have reduced or eliminated the rigid constraints on female behavior of earlier decades. That is, along with the benefits of greater equality in the work force and social spheres may have come the increased negative "side effect" of more drug abuse among females entering traditionally male activities. This suggestion would seem particularly likely in the collegiate environment where traditional sex roles are most often challenged, where deviant behavior in general is more toler-

ated, and where drug use, especially alcohol consumption, is quite heavy.

In support of this "convergence theory" one could note that the prevalence of alcohol use (nearly ubiquitous on most campuses) is now about the same for men and women with 85 to 95% of students typically reporting drinking alcohol during the academic year. The gap between women and men in how often they drink appears to be getting somewhat smaller too as women have become more comfortable drinking in a greater variety of social situations. Recent survey research has shown a considerable reduction in the difference between men's and women's illicit drug use as well as campus (Perkins, 1989).

For the most part, however, research has not supported this "convergence hypothesis" about gender difference in drug use for general populations (Biener, 1987; Clayton, et. al., 1986; Ferrence, 1989; Ferrence and Whitehead, 1980; Kaestner, et. al., Robbins, 1989; Wilsnack, et. al., 1984) or for college populations in particular (Berkowitz and Perkins, 1987; Biber, et al., 1980; Perkins, in press; Temple, 1987). Differences in the amount of alcohol consumed per occasion by men and women on campus have not narrowed. Moreover, men still typically report at least two or three times more negative consequences such as property damage, fighting, and driving while impaired due to their alcohol use.

Finally, it is important to note that where gender differences in the extent of illicit drug use have declined, this has been essentially the result of substantial overall declines in illicit drug use on campuses over the last ten years. In other words, women have not been increasing their illicit drug use to match that of men (use has declined for both males and fe-

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males), but rather, men have been reducing their use at a faster rate (starting from higher levels in previous years) to come closer to the also declining use of women (Perkins, 1991a). The implication from these findings is that men still are more problematic as alcohol and drug users in college and that the development of educational programming and policies targeted for male domains such as single-sex residence halls, fraternities, and athletic teams are the "front line" efforts for primary prevention of most abuse.

Another implication of this larger campus norm for male drug use concerns the weak effect for men of strategies based on "getting students involved" in campus extracurricular programs and student organizations (Perkins and Berkowitz, 1988). It is usually thought that if students can become more integrated in such activities, then they will be diverted from alternative social activities including drug use. Some research evidence has suggested that while this dynamic may be operative for women, it is less effective for men. For males to be integrated in high profile activities and to take leadership roles does not require avoidance of drug abuse in the same way that social norms for women constrain their use if they are to be publicly involved in activities. A more promising strategy for reducing men's use is to directly challenge the perceived male stereotype of heavy use as a misperception to which males do not need to conform (Perkins and Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins, 1991b).

Creating a simple dichotomy between male and female drug use (as most discussions of gender do) is misleading, even though the gap appears to be especially wide with regard to alcohol use. In reality, the clear majority of collegiate men and women drink light or moderate amounts of alcohol and similarly limit their frequency of consumption. It is among a frequent-heavy drinking category of students where gender becomes a predomi-

nate factor. Depending upon the measures of heavy or problem drinking used, 25 to 45% of college men may typically fall into this category, while only about 5 to 15% of college women will be included on most campuses. Thus the majority of college men drink only moderately at most

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like almost all of their female peers. They are unfairly stereotyped as heavy drinkers in a simple gender division. Moreover, this majority of males falsely perceive the norm for male peers in general as that of heavy use (everyone else misperceives this too) creating further peer pressures for them to participate in heavy drinking as part of the campus expectation for males. This aggravates the stereotype, of course, by adding to male problem drinking.

For females who do drink heavily, a very different, but in some ways more problematic, dynamic exists. Because these females are proportionately few, they do not have their own social drinking

culture. Thus, one option for the female alcohol abuser on campus is to drink alone. She thereby avoids the stigma of being intoxicated in public, which is still less acceptable for women, but incurs other serious risks associated with drinking alone where no one else can monitor or watch out for an alcohol overdose. The other female option for heavy use may be even more risky. While men who become heavy drinkers can simply move from one social set of male peers to another, the woman who drinks socially and excessively will be doing so disproportionately in the company of men. This brings another set of special risks, most notably acquaintance rape and sexual assault which are strongly linked to alcohol and drug use on campuses (Berkowitz, 1992).

The continuing gap between collegiate male and female drinking levels per se should not diminish concern about alcohol abuse among female students for many other reasons as well. On average, women can become intoxicated with less alcohol due to lower body weight and a higher fat-to-water ratio that produce higher alcohol concentrations in the body. Thus a difference between women and men in the quantities consumed can exist with some similarity in intoxication levels or the gender difference might disappear when body weight is controlled (Brennan, et. al., 1986; Ratliff and Burkhart, 1984). Some research has suggested that women who do abuse alcohol experience an accelerated progression from initial problems to treatment for alcoholism and that this "telescoping of alcoholism" is not simply the result of a culturally greater propensity for females to seek therapy (Piazza, et. al., 1989).

Although the use of illicit drugs such as marijuana, hallucinogens, or cocaine or use of stimulants, barbiturates, or tranquilizers not under doctors orders are equally or more prevalent among non-

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college youth in the years following high school in comparisons with their collegiate counterparts for both genders, alcohol use presents a quite different picture based on recent nationwide survey data (Johnston, et. al., 1991). Problem drinking is more prevalent among collegians (1 to 4 years beyond high school) than among their same age peers, but most important here is the fact that the gap is much greater among women. For example, while 49.9% of college males vs. 45.5% of other male peers in these data reported having 5 or more drinks in a row in the past two weeks, 33.9% of college females vs. 23.9% of other females reported this behavior. This difference between college/non-college females means that women in college are almost one and a half times as likely to drink heavily upon occasion as young women who do not attend college. In contrast, although the absolute risk of at least occasional heavy drinking is much higher for men than women in either circumstance, there is only a very slight increase in risk of alcohol abuse for men entering a collegiate environment. So the campus context is a **relatively** much more risky place for women regarding alcohol abuse.

The relativity of gender differences in alcohol problems can also be seen when examining students' reports of the negative effects of their use. Although a growing body of research providing indicators of women's problem drinking at all ages has emerged in recent years (Schmidt, et. al., 1990), most research on gender differences in negative effects of drinking, unfortunately, has concentrated on measures biased to problems most common among males (e.g. fighting, destruction of property, and arrests). Gender differences in the prevalence of negative consequences of alcohol use vary considerably, however, depending upon the type of consequence. One recent study that assessed a broad range of alcohol-related problems among undergraduates at an eastern uni-

versity (O'Hare, 1990), while finding somewhat greater incidences for men on several specific items, noted no significant difference in overall reporting of problems between men and women. In another recent study of undergraduates in

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a liberal arts college setting (Perkins, in press), differences in specific consequences varied substantially among women and men on campus. Although negative effects of drinking such as property damage, injury to others, fighting, behavior offending others, and impaired driving occurred considerably more often among males in comparison with females, alcohol-related problems with academic work, unintended sexual activity, and damaged friendships or relationships were less skewed toward males. There were no gender differences among students reporting memory loss or injury to oneself in this study.

In short, consequences of drinking that are more public, that involve legal repercussions, and that damage or endanger others are likely to remain largely male phenomena. If the type of consequence is less public and less prone to invoke legal action, however, college women are likely to experience a significant portion of the problem and intoxication is equally risky for both genders as it may directly result in physical harm to oneself. So when a

female student does become intoxicated, her gender identity and campus sex-role expectations are not likely to serve as restraints against her hurting herself. Thus it appears that gender identities constrain women and encourage men to become intoxicated in behavioral ways and in social contexts that are typical of traditional sex roles, even in a contemporary college environment. But the alcohol problems most common among women on campus should not be neglected simply because the alcohol problems of males may be more extensive or more publicly offensive.

The examination of a greater variety of specific emotional, physical, sexual, and academic problems is ultimately needed in the study of gender difference regarding all types of drug abuse on campuses. Interventions by counselors, health educators, and other student assistance programs must give greater attention to an even wider variety of privatized problems as well as public problems that may potentially result from drug use in college. In the meantime, the question of who is at risk for drug abuse will persist as a complex problem requiring consideration of physiology, personality development, societal norms, campus cultures, and perceived (or misperceived) peer expectations. And the impact of gender will undoubtedly remain a crucial factor in all of these aspects of college student development.

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