

Example SURE Proposal: Psychology

INTRODUCTION.

Heavy episodic alcohol abuse among college students (i.e., “binge drinking”) is a serious public health issue at universities nationwide. National surveys of U.S. colleges and universities indicate that nearly half of all students engage in binge drinking (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Seibring, Nelson, & Lee, 2002). As a result, students are especially susceptible to experiencing the many adverse effects associated excessive alcohol use (Bladt, 2002). College binge drinking has been consistently linked to a number of negative consequences including increased risk for brain damage, auto accidents, high-risk sexual activity, increased vulnerability to injury, property damage, fighting, and trouble with authorities (see Turrisi et al., 2000 for a review). Because drinking patterns typically become established during the first year of college, freshmen are at high risk for experiencing the many adverse effects associated with binge drinking. Previous studies report that compared to non-freshman undergraduates, freshman students drink less alcohol overall and drink on fewer occasions, but consume more alcohol per occasion resulting in an increased frequency of binge drinking for this group (Wechsler, et al., 2000; Clements, 1999).

Risk and Protective Factors

Binge drinking and alcohol-related problems are heavily influenced by contextual variables such as the prevailing policies and norms regarding alcohol use, environmental factors, and the demographic characteristics of the students. The risk factors for binge drinking vary widely across institutions and/or cultural contexts (Weitzman, 2004). The numerous risk factors related to binge drinking and alcohol-related problems include gender (men binge drink more), region (students located in the Northeast and North central regions of the U.S. binge drink more), campus affiliation (students involved in athletics or Greek life binge drink more), campus residence (students living on campus in standard dormitories binge drink more), ethnicity (Caucasians binge drink more), class status (freshman and sophomores binge drink more), and age (younger students binge drink more) (Wechsler et al., 2000). Other environmental risk factors include attending a “high binge” campus, easy access to alcohol, and the price of alcohol in the adjoining community (Emmons, Weschsler, Dowdall, & Abraham, 1998). Identified protective factors that reduce the risk for heavy drinking are increased parental supervision, living in a controlled substance-free environment or at home, and restriction to alcohol based on the legal drinking age (Weitzman & Kawachi, 2000). In the proposed study, I plan to examine binge drinking and related consequences among college freshmen from two distinct cultural contexts.

Overview of the Proposed Study

The proposed study investigates heavy drinking patterns and related consequences between two groups of college students who reside in different cultural contexts. The proposed project is based on alcohol survey data collected from freshman students attending the University of San Diego and the University of Manitoba in Canada. A major policy difference between these two universities involves the age of legal access to alcohol. At the University of San Diego, alcohol possession and use is strictly prohibited on campus and is illegal for students under 21 years of age in the state of California. In contrast, the University of Manitoba campus has three university-sponsored bars on campus that serve alcohol to students and the legal drinking age is 18 in the province of Manitoba.

Hypotheses

I will assess two contrasting hypotheses regarding the potential impact of legal drinking age on drinking behavior and alcohol-related problems among college freshmen attending the USD and the University of Manitoba.

The “*availability hypothesis*” predicts that the Canadian freshmen will drink more than their USD counterparts because the legal status of alcohol does not impose restrictions on their alcohol consumption. According to this hypothesis, Canadian freshmen will be more likely to take advantage of this ready access to alcohol and engage in more binge drinking and experience more alcohol-related problems than USD freshmen.

Alternatively, the “*forbidden fruit hypothesis*” predicts that USD freshmen will demonstrate higher rates of binge drinking than the Canadian freshmen. Because alcohol use and possession is illegal for the USD freshmen, drinking is more likely to be associated with rebellion, mischief, and independence from sources of authority and control. These associations with alcohol use are compounded by the developmental transitions experienced by most incoming freshmen students at USD (e.g., living away from parents for the first time). These factors can heavily influence the perception of alcohol use, and as a result, the USD freshman student may experience more difficulty exercising appropriate restraint and responsibility regarding alcohol use. Thus, this hypothesis predicts that USD freshmen will report more drinking to become intoxicated and more alcohol related problems than their Canadian freshmen peers.

GENERAL AIMS OF THE PROPOSED STUDY

The general aims of my proposal are to examine the effects of country of residence (i.e., U.S. vs. Canada) among college freshmen students regarding: (a) binge drinking prevalence and frequency; (b) types and frequencies of alcohol-related problems; (c) the social contexts and motivations associated with drinking; and (d) cognitive beliefs about the positive and negative effects of alcohol (i.e., alcohol expectancies).

METHOD

I will add to an existing data set provided by Dr. Michael Ichiyama (my faculty sponsor) that includes alcohol use surveys from 541 first-year college undergraduates (174 freshmen from USD and 347 freshmen from the University of Manitoba). I will collect an additional 173 alcohol use surveys from the psychology subject pool at USD to add to the existing USD freshmen subset in order to better balance the comparison groups.

Measures

In addition to basic demographic data, participant surveys will include the following measures:

Binge drinking. Rates of binge drinking will be measured according to standards defined by the NIAAA National Advisory Council (Wechsler & Austin, 1998). In this definition, binge drinking corresponds to “consuming 5 or more drinks (male) or four or more drinks (female), in about two hours” (see also Wechsler, et al., 2002).

Alcohol-related problems. Participants report the frequency with which they experience 16 different alcohol-related problems (Presley, et al., 1994). These problems are physical, cognitive, academic, or behavioral in nature and vary in type and severity.

Social context of drinking. This measure assesses the situational factors affecting the motivation for heavy alcohol consumption (Beck et al., 1993). These factors include gaining peer acceptance, facilitating social interactions, coping with stress or emotional pain, sex seeking, drinking within the family, and drinking while operating or riding in a motor vehicle.

Alcohol expectancies. This measure assesses the beliefs about the effects of alcohol on various types of experiences such as cognitive abilities, sexual enhancement, increased arousal, social behavior, and tension reduction (Brown, Christiansen, & Goldman, 1987).

ANALYSES

Analyses will be computed using the SPSS statistical package. Under the guidance of Dr. Ichiyama I will calculate appropriate descriptive and inferential statistics to assess the proposed aims of the study.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH.

Despite the many problems associated with alcohol abuse among college students, and the efforts that have been taken to deter it, binge drinking remains a significant public health concern at universities. Examining contrasting public policies toward drinking and gaining a better understanding of the development of norms and attitudes toward alcohol use across cultures are two important areas of future research. Identifying the characteristics of high-risk freshman may better inform early prevention programming on college campuses.

References

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