



Gender, social support, and alcohol drinking among Slovak university students; A longitudinal study.

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Introduction

The freshman year at a university is a unique and potentially very stressful transition period for new university students. During this period students establish their college/university identity, develop a sense of personal and social identity, gain independence, may struggle to fit in with their peers, and have to establish a new social network (Lu, 1994, Borsari, Murphy, Barnett, 2007). Alcohol use is often a part of this process, and many freshmen develop a pattern of heavy excessive drinking with alcohol being the primary drug of choice among university students (Larimer, Kilmer, Lee, 2005, Borsari, Murphy, Barnett, 2007).

It has been found that a supportive social network can moderate the extent to which college students consume alcohol in order to cope with difficult situations related to their university studies (Dulin, Hill, Ellingson, 2006). It has been also shown that social support is associated with alcohol consumption in similar ways for both genders (Green, Freeborn, Polen, 2001). Further findings indicate the importance of parental context, as well as peer influence in alcohol consumption among college students (Walls, Fairlie, Wood, 2009). This is in line with some studies which have emphasized the importance of parent-based alcohol prevention strategies among college undergraduates. They showed that parent-based alcohol prevention was related to the decreasing likelihood of making a transition into a regular drinker for women by slowed frequency of drinking the over the freshman year (Ichiyama, Fairlie, Wood, 2009).

Aim

To explore the trends in alcohol drinking among university students according to gender, and social support changes within a longitudinal study design.

Methods

The study was a part of the SLICE study (Student Life Cohort in Europe) (<http://www.slice-study.eu/>).

Sample

Longitudinal data-collection:

At the baseline (T1) 800 university freshmen from Slovakia

At the follow up (T2) 237 university students (79.4% females, mean age 20.8, SD = 3.6)

Only fully completed questionnaires were included in the analyses

Data collection: online questionnaires administered in 05/2011 (T1) and 10/2012 (T2)

Measures

AUDIT-C (Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Suanders, Monteiro, 2001)

- a brief alcohol screening instrument

- the AUDIT-C is scored on a scale of 0-12, each AUDIT-C question has 5 answer choices

- a score of 4 or more is considered positive, optimal for identifying hazardous drinking or an active alcohol use disorder in men

- a score of 3 or more is considered positive (same as above) in women

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS, Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet et al., 1988)

- the MSPSS is a 12-item, unidimensional tool to measure how one perceives her/his social support system, distinguishing the individual sources of social support (i.e. family / FAM, friends / FRI, and significant other / SO)

- each item is rated using a 7 point Likert scale ranging from "definitely no" to "definitely yes"

- a higher score indicates a higher level of social support in each domain

- Cronbach's alpha in this study (T1) reached 0.91 (FAM=0.93, FRI=0.96, SO=0.92)

The sample was divided into three groups (Visual Binning) based on the changes in social support that occurred over the one year period: 1. with an increase of social support, 2. without an important change and 3. with a decrease of social support

Statistical analysis

- Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, Mann-Whitney U test

- SPSS 20.

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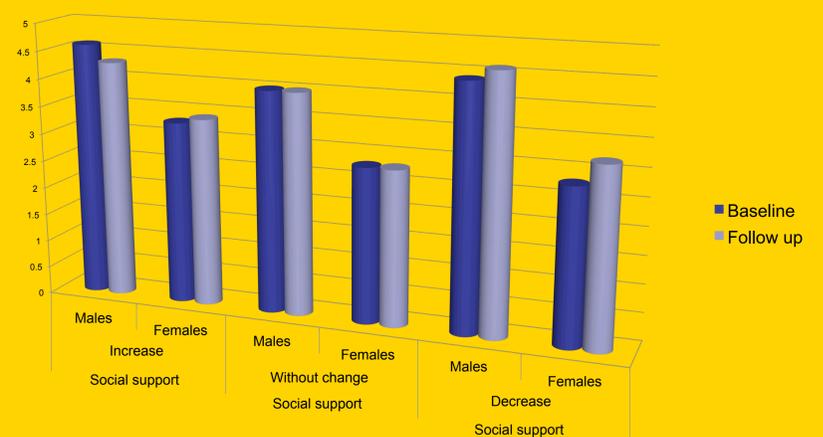
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Results

The mean scores of the AUDIT-C (4.33, SD = 2.28/^{males}, 3.12, SD = 2.10/^{females} at baseline and 4.60, SD = 2.37/^{males}, 3.26, SD = 2.04/^{females} at the follow up) were close to the recommended gender specific threshold for identifying hazardous drinking.

A significantly higher level of alcohol drinking was found among males compared to females at the baseline (the mean rank for males (126.09) was higher than the mean rank for females (94.3) ($U = 2141.5, z = -3.13, p = .002, r = .22$). At the follow up measurements the mean rank for males (133.21) was higher than the mean rank for females (97.66) ($U = 2211.5, z = -3.40, p = .001, r = .24$).

A significant increase in alcohol drinking was found only among females who reported a decrease of family social support between the baseline and the follow up measurement ($Md^{baseline} = 2.5, Md^{follow up} = 3.0, z = -2.023, p = 0.043$, Graph 1).



Graph 1 Mean AUDIT-C scores for the three groups of university students that were created according to the social support (from family) change over the 1-year period (increase, without change, decrease of social support)

Conclusions

The findings of this study support the importance of a universal alcohol drinking prevention programs aimed at the transition period difficulties of starting university, especially among female - adolescents.

To increase the awareness of parents regarding the importance of family social support especially for their daughter(s) after starting the university

The results of this longitudinal study contribute to the current knowledge of the risk-focused alcohol use prevention among freshmen during their transition period when starting university.

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