

Evaluation of Legal Risk Behaviors in College Students Who Use Alcohol

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Abstract

Frequent, heavy alcohol use among college students results in a myriad of problems, including legal problems. For many college students, alcohol possession and use is an illegal act itself. Little is known about the effectiveness of legal encounters for reducing subsequent drinking behavior. It is expected that after experiencing a legal encounter an individual changes his or her future behavior. Does a person alter his or her drinking habits? Is a person more careful about what kinds of behaviors he or she engages in while drinking in order to avoid attracting legal authorities (e.g., drinking with a small group of people)? Do both changes occur? Measure of alcohol use is readily available to answer the first questions. Answers to the subsequent questions require an assessment of behaviors that put one at risk for experiencing legal consequences when drinking. The purpose of the study was to evaluate a new measure of alcohol-use related legal risk behaviors, the Legal Risk Assessment (LRA) and to assess its psychometric properties.

Keywords

Legal Risk, College Students, Alcohol.

1. Introduction and Method

College students who used alcohol were recruited from undergraduate psychology and business courses. Students were provided information about accessing Part 1 of an on-line survey, which was available for a two week period of time. Two weeks later they were asked to complete Part 2 of the survey which included a re-test of the LRA items.

Legal Risk Assessment (LRA). Potential LRA items were generated that represented behaviors college students may engage in while using alcohol that increase or decrease their risk of experiencing a legal encounter. These items were compared and expanded in accordance with the results of Kulich and Rosenberg's (2000) study. LRA items reflected an individual's choice in drinking in a variety of social contexts, choice in transportation issues, choice in drinking in a variety of other contexts (e.g., drinking where other drugs are being used), and choice in engaging in illegal behaviors (e.g., using false identification). Participants were asked "In the past month when you were drinking alcohol how often were you...." Response options were "never," "rarely," "many times," "always." The LRA was created with the intent to reliably measure legal risk behavior to evaluate a subset of behaviors possibly affected by an aversive legal encounter related to alcohol use.

Other measures. Participants completed a demographic measures, a measure of family history of alcoholism (Chippers & Smit, 2001), the College Alcohol Problems Scale-revised (Maddock, Laforge, Rossi, & O'Hare, 2001), the Frequency-Quantity Questionnaire (Dimeff, Baer, Kivlahan, & Marlatt, 1999), the California Personality Inventory-Socialization Scale (Gough, 1994), the Eysenck Impulsivity Questionnaire (Eysenck et al., 1985), and the Marlowe Crowne Social Desirability Scale Short Form (Reynolds, 1984)

2. Participants and Results

Two hundred thirty two students participated in an on-line survey. Participants received research credit in return for their participation. The sample included both males (n=73, 31.5%) and females (n=159, 68.5%), was mostly Caucasian (n=98, 85.3%), and was mostly freshman (n=99, 42.7%).

Sixty three (27.2%) reported being members of a social sorority or fraternity, and most participants reported living on-campus (n=110, 47.4%). Consistent with a typical undergraduate sample, most participants were unmarried (n=220, 94.8%) and the average age was 20.1 (SD=2.9, range=17 to 48). All participants used alcohol, at least occasionally, and most reported binge drinking at least once in the previous month.

Factor Structure. The factor structure was analyzed using a Principle Components Analysis with direct oblique rotation. Loadings $> .40$ on one factor and $< .30$ (with a difference of $> .20$) on the other factors were considered clean loadings. A three factor solution fit the data well and accounted for 40% of the total variance. LRA items and pattern matrix factor loadings are presented in Table 1. The factors were labeled risky drinking, safe travel, and private drinking. Correlations between subscale scores were not significant, indicating that the factors are relatively orthogonal.

Risky drinking scores were significantly correlated with alcohol-related negative consequences reported for the past month ($r = .48, p < .01$), past year ($r = .44, p < .01$), and level of impulsivity ($r = .19, p < .01$). Private drinking scores were positively and significantly correlated with alcohol-related negative consequences for the past month only ($r = .13, p = 0.3$).

Validity. Subscale correlations with drinking habits are shown in Table 2. There was no influence of impulsivity on the relationship between the three factors and quantity and frequency of alcohol use. The correlations between LRA factors and the Marlowe Crowne (MC) Social Desirability Scale were insignificant (r 's = .03, .01, .09).

Additional Analyses. A chi-square analysis indicated that men were more likely to report previously experiencing a legal encounter than women. Analyses revealed that Caucasian, never married, sophomore and junior level students, students who were members of a sorority or fraternity, students living off campus with a roommate, and those living in Greek housing were more likely to experience a legal encounter in the past year compared to their counterparts. A substantial number of these participants reported binge drinking in the past month (n = 28, 90.3%) and on an average weekend evening in the past month (n = 15, 48.38%). The majority of these participants reported drinking six times in the last month (n = 12, 38.7%) and reported drinking to get drunk one and a half times in the past month (n = 13, 41.9%).

An independent samples t- test indicated that individuals who reported experiencing a legal encounter in the past year reported significantly higher rates of risky drinking behavior, reported significantly more alcohol -related negative consequences, and greater impulsivity. The legal encounter group also reported significantly higher mean scores on most measures of drinking habits. It appears that college students who experienced a legal encounter in the past year engage in more risky behaviors, are more impulsive, experience more difficulties related to alcohol use, and drink in higher quantities and more frequently than college students who have not experienced a legal encounter in the past year.

3. Conclusion

The LRA may be a valid and reliable measure of alcohol-related legal risk behaviors. The LRA consisted of three factors: Risky Drinking, Safe Travel, and Private Drinking. Adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability were demonstrated and participants' responses appeared to be free of distortion due to social desirability. The validity of the LRA was partially demonstrated by identifying types of drinking behaviors (i.e., risky, safe, private) that are relatively distinct from quantity and frequency of alcohol use. Thus, the LRA appears to have adequate initial psychometric properties that support its further use and evaluation.

It is not yet known whether the LRA is a useful tool to predict alcohol-related legal encounters in college students. If research can demonstrate that the LRA is effective in identifying students who are likely to have a legal encounter in the near future, then this measure could be used as a way to understand what changes, if any, may occur in behavior following a legal encounter. This study suggests that students who experienced a legal encounter in the past year engage in particularly heavy episodic alcohol use and may be a reasonable target group for a brief targeted prevention intervention.

However, such interventions would not be necessary if the legal encounter itself results in significant and durable changes in drinking behaviors. In addition to determining the predictive validity of the LRA, future research should assess the effect legal encounters have upon subsequent behavior in college students who use alcohol.

References

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