

Commentary

Elevated Substance Use Among Lesbian and Bisexual Women: Possible Explanations and Intervention Implications for an Urgent Public Health Concern

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Potential explanations for the elevated rates of substance use among lesbian and bisexual women relative to heterosexual women are provided by focusing on substance use differences among lesbian and bisexual women. The three explanations include butch versus femme (i.e., gender atypicality) differences in substance use, lesbian versus bisexual disparities in substance use, and disparities associated with socializing in substance-using settings, such as bars. Implications for interventions to reduce substance use and abuse among lesbian and bisexual women are addressed.

Keywords lesbian; gay; bisexual; substance use; substance abuse; gay-related stress; internalized homophobia; youth; adolescents

The elevated use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs among lesbian and bisexual women relative to heterosexual women is a major public health concern that exists regardless of the definition of sexuality (e.g., by attractions, sex of sexual partner, self-identification), the developmental stage (i.e., adolescents or adults), or the recruitment venue (e.g., high schools, colleges, other community settings; e.g., Bontempo and D'Augelli, 2002; Burgard, Cochran, and Mays, 2005; Eisenberg and Wechsler, 2003; Rosario, Hunter, and Gwadz, 1997; Russell, Driscoll, and Truong, 2002; Ziyadeh et al., 2007). Nevertheless, these same studies find variability in the substance use of lesbian and bisexual women, which indicates that not all lesbian and bisexual women report high levels of substance use and, by extension, that the substance-use disparity between lesbian/bisexual women and their heterosexual peers may be attributed to a subsample of lesbian and bisexual women. The identification of such a subsample(s) would advance scientific knowledge and hone intervention efforts.

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There may be characteristics unique to lesbian and bisexual women that render some of them more susceptible to substance use and the substance abuse that may follow. In a companion article in this issue, Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (in press) hypothesize and find that butch women as compared with femme women generally have elevated substance use and abuse. Possible underlying explanations for butch and femme differences are discussed and include biological factors, the need to adhere to the male role with its greater emphasis on substance use than that of the female role, and differential exposure to gay-related stress. The latter, gay-related stress, refers to experiencing society's stigmatization of homosexuality (Rosario et al., 1997; Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, and Reid, 1996), which includes experiences of victimization, prejudice, discrimination, and related external life events, as well as internalization by the lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual of society's stigmatization of homosexuality (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Gwadz, 2002).

A second potential difference in substance use concerns sexual orientation. Young bisexual women report more substance use than young heterosexual or lesbian women in representative samples (Eisenberg and Wechsler, 2003; Russell et al., 2002). Interestingly, another representative study found more childhood and current adversity, including financial difficulties, among bisexual men and women as compared with heterosexual peers. In addition, the bisexuals experienced more stressful life events and financial difficulties than their lesbian and gay peers (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, and Christensen, 2002). Therefore, stress in general and gay-related stress in particular may account for differences among sexual orientation groups.

A third subgroup of lesbian and bisexual women may be identified by setting rather than personal characteristics. To date, much socializing in the lesbian and gay community continues to occur in bars and settings where alcohol and other drugs are available. However, substance use should decrease for those who find alternative settings in which to meet and socialize with other lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, as has been found (Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter, 2004).

The experiences that may place butch women, bisexual women, and bar socializing women at risk for substance use and abuse, if confirmed, would have implications for intervention efforts. The hypothesis that the elevated substance use of butch and bisexual women may be attributed to gay-related stress would suggest two strategies. First, social policy initiatives would be needed to reduce the population-wide burden of gay-related stress. Second, to the extent that substance use became a means by which to individually cope with gay-related stress or the distress it might generate, intervention efforts would be needed to promote alternative coping strategies. Last, alternatives to bars and similar settings would be promoted to reduce the risk of substance use attributed to socializing in such settings.

Research to confirm the subgroups and the possible explanations linking particular experiences to elevated substance use. The goal is to eventually alleviate the substance use that exists among lesbian and bisexual youth and adults, and to eliminate the differences between them and their heterosexual peers. Therefore, a vigorous research effort is strongly encouraged.

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