Family Struggles and Substance Use among First Generation College Students

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Introduction

The tendency for substance use to increase among college students has been a well-studied trend with risk factors including socioeconomic status, minorities, stress, social networks, etc. (Broman, 2005; Humensky, 2010; Mason, Zaharakis & Benotsch, 2014; O'Hare & Sherrer, 2000; Sher & Rutledge, 2007; Stern & Wiens, 2009). Family struggles and conflict during the adolescent years was found to influence drug and alcohol use in early adulthood (Kristjansson, Sigfusdottir, Allegrante, & Helgason, 2009). Furthermore, Harrel, Huang, & Kepler (2013) found that high socioeconomic status was associated with increased alcohol problems among college students suggesting that higher incomes make high cost substances more easily attainable. College students are also especially vulnerable to emotional and social stressors as they transition to a new college environment away from the life of comfort at home. Stressful situations are associated with negative coping mechanisms, such as alcohol and drug use, which consequently increases stress even further due to the dangerous effects of excessive substance use (O'Hare & Sherrer, 2000).

Research has primarily focused on risk factors for substance use among college students in general, however, very little research has explored risk factors for first generation students. First generation students are characterized as students whose parents never attended college and they comprise about 50% of the college student population (Bui, 2002; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). These students are more likely to be of ethnic minority, have lower socioeconomic status, and have lower academic achievements. In addition to the general stressors that nearly all college students may face, first generation students have even more (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron, 2013). These students have lower academic motivation, less academic preparation, less family support, and less financial assistance (lower socioeconomic status) which may entice substance use in regards to coping with stress or may put off substance use because of financial instability. Therefore, the current study sought to examine the relationships between family struggles, as measured by parental marital status and socioeconomic status, and substance use among first generation college students. Although first generation students face a significant amount of stressors and stress has been found to be a contributing factor of substance use, they are also more likely to be of low socioeconomic status and lack social support networks, which were found not to be contributing factors of substance use. Therefore, it was hypothesized that first generation college students would be less likely to engage in risky substance use behaviors overall.

Method

Data for the current study was collected from a large southeastern research university. A total of 902 college students completed an online questionnaire and received class credit or extra credit for their participation. The majority of participants were female (*n* = 647, 71.7%) and identified as white (*n* = 613, 68%). The age of participants ranged from 18 to 59 (*M* = 21.58). Two hundred and two participants (22.4%) indicated that they were first generation students.

Participants answered eight questions related to their age, race/ethnicity, gender, and year in college. They also reported the current marital status of their parents (continuously married, divorced, remarried, never married, unknown). Social class was assessed using measures of parental education, income, and occupation as well as measured of self-identified social class identity. Participants also answered a series of questions pertaining to their use of drugs and alcohol in the past thirty days.

Table 1. *Participants Reported Drug and Alcohol Use*

	Cigarettes	Tobacco smoked from Hookah	Little cigars	Marijuana	Ecstasy	Methamphetamines	Cocaine	Ketamine	Poppers	One serving of Alcohol	Four or more servings of Alcohol
Never used	638 (70.7%)	473 (52.4%)	684 (75.8%)	483 (53.5%)	806 (89.4%)	875 (97.0%)	828 (91.8%)	890 (98.7%)	889 (98.6%)	137 (15.2%)	266 (29.5%)
Used but not in the past 30 days	161 (17.8%)	312 (34.6%)	166 (18.4%)	262 (29%)	81 (9%)	21 (2.3%)	57 (6.3%)	9 (1%)	10 (1.1%)	217 (24.1%)	232 (25.7%)
1-2 days	38 (4.2%)	66 (7.3%)	34 (3.8%)	45 (5%)	11 (1.2%)	2 (0.2%)	13 (1.4%)	1 (0.1%)	2 (0.2%)	201 (22.3%)	153 (17%)
3-5 days	12 (1.3%)	34 (3.8%)	6 (0.7%)	29 (3.2%)	3 (0.3%)	2 (0.2%)	1 (0.1%)	--	1 (0.1%)	124 (13.7)	99 (11%)
6-9 days	13 (1.4%)	10 (1.1%)	5 (0.6%)	23 (2.5%)	--	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)	--	108 (12%)	88 (9.8%)
10-19 days	10 (1.1%)	7 (0.8%)	5 (0.6%)	24 (2.7%)	1 (0.1%)	---	1 (0.1%)	--	--	99 (11%)	57 (6.3%)
20-29 days	5 (0.6%)	--	2 (0.2%)	20 (2.2%)	--	---	---	--	--	11 (1.2%)	6 (0.7%)
All 30 days	25 (2.8%)	--	--	16 (1/8%)	--	---	---	--	--	5 (0.6%)	1 (0.1%)

Table 2. *Inter-correlation of Study Variables*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1.Social Class	1	.36**	.16**	-.04	-.05	-.16**	-.07*	.13**	.08*	-.08*	-.13**	.05	.08*
2.First Generation	.36**	1	.06	-.02	.03	-.12**	-.10**	.13**	.05	-.06	-.11**	.04	.07*
3.Married	.16**	.06	1	-.52**	-.50**	-.36**	-.07*	.08*	.04	-.10**	-.02	.01	-.00
4.Divorced	-.04	-.02	-.52**	1	-.19**	-.14**	-.01	-.09*	-.06	.13**	.01	.00	.02
5.Remarried	-.05	.03	-.50**	-.19**	1	-.13**	.04	-.01	-.01	-.03	.04	.00	.01
6.Never married	-.16**	-.12**	-.36**	-.14**	-.13**	1	.08*	-.04	.04	.03	-.01	-.03	-.04
7.Gender	-.07*	-.10**	-.07*	-.01	.04	.08*	1	-.15**	-.06	.11**	.10**	-.04	-.10**
8.Freshman	.13**	.13**	.08*	-.09*	-.01	-.04	-.15**	1	-.26**	-.44**	-.40**	-.06	-.06*
9.Sophomore	.08*	.05	.04	-.06	-.01	.04	-.06	-.26**	1	-.25**	-.22**	-.03	-.00
10.Junior	-.08*	-.06	-.10**	.13**	-.03	.03	.11**	-.44**	-.25**	1	-.38**	-.05	.03
11.Senior	-.13**	-.11**	-.02	.01	.04	-.01	.10**	-.40**	-.22**	-.38**	1	-.05	.04
12.Graduate	.05	.04	.01	.00	.00	-.03	-.04	-.06	-.03	-.05	-.05	1	.00
13.Drug and Alcohol Use	.08*	.07*	-.00	.02	.01	-.04	-.10**	-.06	-.00	.03	.04	.00	1

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

Table 3. *Regression Coefficients*

	Drug and Alcohol Use
First Generation	.05
Married Parents	-.02
Social Class	.07*
Gender	-.12**
Freshman	
Sophomore	.03
Junior	.10*
Senior	.11**
Graduate	.00
R^2	.03
F	3.04**

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, the data indicated that marijuana and alcohol use were the most prevalent, with 46.5% of all participants reporting having used marijuana and 84.8% reporting drinking only one serving of alcohol before.

Bivariate correlations (Table 2) were conducted to determine the relationship between social class, first generation status, parental martial status, participant gender, year in college, and substance use. Results indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between substance use and social class, r (902) = .08, p < .05, and substance use and generational status, r (902) = .07, p < 05. The correlational analysis further revealed a significant negative correlation between substance use and gender, r (902) = -.10, p < .01. However, the correlation between substance use and parental marital status and year in college were not significant.

A linear regression analysis was conducted to determine how first generation college student status, parents' marital status, social class, gender, and year in college related to participants drug and alcohol use. The overall regression model was significant, F (8, 893) = 3.04, p < .01, R^2 = .03. Social class, gender, junior and senior level college students were all identified as significant predictors of drug and alcohol use, whereas college student generational status, parents' marital status, freshmen and sophomore level college students were not. Regression coefficients can be found in Table 3.

Discussion

The results of this study are supportive of the hypothesis that family struggles, as was measured by social class and generational status, do relate to substance use among college students, with the exception of parental marital status. According to the results, the students that associated themselves with a higher social class were more likely to engage in alcohol and drug use. It can be inferred that the reason behind this finding is because those with a greater income have a larger opportunity to afford these costly substances. Additionally, the students that were not of first generation status and those of a higher year in college (juniors and seniors) were also more inclined to engage in substance use. Drug and alcohol use was also higher among male college students than female. In accordance with the research done by Korcuska and Thombs (2003), this suggests that males may be more vulnerable to the extremes of substance use rather than substance use in general. Since first generation students were found to not be at higher risk of substance use in comparison to continuing generation peers, it may be inferred that this is because they are more likely to be of lower socioeconomic status and therefore, cannot afford the extra expenses.

Implications for this study include incorporating drug and alcohol prevention services on college campuses to help reduce substance use among college students and the negative consequences associated with it. Since males and students of junior and senior status have a higher rate of substance use, those programs may want to target that specific population in addition to all college students. Even though first-generation students do not have a higher rate of substance use based on the results of this study, it would still be beneficial for college campuses to incorporate programs to help these students adapt to the college lifestyle and provide them with a social support system that they may lack.