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DRINKING TO COPE: MOTIVATIONAL PATHWAYS TO PROBLEMATIC DRINKING AMONG LATINA COLLEGE STUDENTS IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Background: While Latinxs report the second highest drinking rates following White individuals, Latinxs experience more drinking problems. This disparity places Latinxs at risk for worse outcomes. This study aimed to identify pathways to problematic drinking among Latina drinkers attending majority-white universities.

Method: A structural equation model tested a motivational model of alcohol related problems that encompassed socio-cultural and cognitive risk and protective factors. The study included 171 Latina female college students enrolled in five predominantly White universities. The hypothesized model examined (a) whether drinking motives (i.e., cope with negative emotions, enhance mood, for social rewards, and conform to avoid social rejection) were the most proximal predictors of problematic drinking and (b) the interplay of cognitive (i.e., positive and negative alcohol expectancies and valuations), personality (i.e., sensation seeking), peer (i.e., descriptive and injunctive peer drinking norms), family (i.e., familism, traditional gender roles), and college (i.e., climate, stress) factors as they predict problematic drinking through motives.

Results: The proposed model showed good fit (CFI = .98; RMSEA = .04). Consistent with hypotheses, coping motives were the strongest predictors of problems followed by enhancement motives over and above sensation seeking. Mediation analyses revealed that negative expectancies and college climate had indirect effects on drinking problems through coping motives. That is, stronger endorsement of the negative effects of alcohol and lower sense of belonging at college were independently related to coping motives and, in turn, to problems. Motives were not mediators of other cognitive, peer, and family predictors.

Conclusion: Drinking to cope with negative affect was the most common pathway to drinking problems among Latina college students in predominantly white institutions and negative aspects of their college experience as well as alcohol expectancies lead to problematic drinking. Importantly, family factors were not protective against problems among Latina students as they are among other Latinx groups. Culturally sensitive interventions for problematic drinking in college should address cognitive and contextual factors that impact the experience of Latina students as they enter contexts that do not match their cultural upbringing and lose the protection of traditional family values.