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Use of Heavier Drinking Contexts among Heterosexuals, Homosexuals and Bisexuals: Results from a National Household Probability Survey*

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ABSTRACT. Objective: Extensive use of specific social contexts (bars and parties, for instance) by homosexuals and bisexuals is thought to be a factor in the higher rates of drinking among these groups. However, much of the empirical evidence behind these assumptions has been based on studies with methodological or sampling shortcomings. This article examines the epidemiological patterns of alcohol contexts in relation to sexual identity, using a large, national, probability population survey. **Method:** We used the 2000 National Alcohol Survey for these analyses. The prevalence of spending leisure time in each of two social contexts (bars and parties) that are associated with heavier drinking is examined by sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and self-identified heterosexuals with same sex partners). In addition, we compare levels of drinking within these contexts by sexual orientation within these groups. **Results:** Exclusively heterosexual women spent less

time in these two contexts relative to all other groups of women. Gay men spent considerably more time in bars compared with the other groups of men. Heterosexual women who reported same sex partners drink more at bars, and bisexual women drink more alcohol at both bars and parties than exclusively heterosexual women. For men, there were no significant differences for average consumption in any of these contexts. Entry of background and demographic variables into logistic regression analyses did little to modify these associations. **Conclusions:** There is empirical evidence that some groups of homosexual and bisexual women and men spend more time than heterosexual individuals in heavier drinking contexts. The frequency of being in these two social contexts does not appear to be associated with heavier drinking within these contexts for men, but it may be related to heavier drinking in those places among some groups of women. (*J. Stud. Alcohol* 66: 105-110, 2005)

IT HAS BEEN argued that excessive alcohol use by gay and lesbian individuals is due to their use of bars as their primary social institution (Israelstam and Lambert, 1984; Rotello, 1997). For example, Fifield et al. (1977) assert that “one-third of the total gay population of Los Angeles abuse alcohol on a regular basis” and that “alcohol abuse is built into the social fabric of this minority lifestyle [because]...about 80 percent of all social activity time is spent at bars or parties where alcohol is served” (p. ii). However, when one examines the empirical evidence, some studies support this contention and others do not (Beaton and Guild, 1976; Bloomfield, 1993; Corby et al., 1996; Lewis et al., 1982; Rietmeijer et al., 1998; Sage, 1975; Stall and Wiley, 1988). For instance, studies by Stall and Wiley (1988) and by Bloomfield (1993), using probability methods, found little or no differences in substance misuse between homosexual and heterosexual men (the former study) and between lesbians and heterosexual women (the latter study).

Much of the empirical evidence, whether supportive or not, is based on data that are not very robust, such as personal observations, information drawn from treatment samples, samples with various methodological problems and/or samples that include only men or only women. For instance, the study by Fifield et al. (1977), often cited as one of the first to measure alcohol problems in gay/bisexual/lesbian groups, estimates that one third of gays are in need of services for alcohol misuse. The data for that study consisted of estimates made by bartenders as well as 200 self-reports from bar patrons. One would expect that people surveyed in bars, whether homosexual or heterosexual, would have higher levels of drinking and alcohol misuse.

Similarly, a series of articles by Saghir and colleagues (Lewis et al., 1982; Saghir et al., 1970a,b) was based on very small groups of individuals (ranging from 40 to 60) recruited from organizations and various types of snowball samples (e.g., having members of a “rare” population refer other people; Goodman, 1961). The homosexuals in these groups were then “matched” to heterosexuals; however, no information is given on sample recruitment methods. Even the best and most scientifically sound studies have limitations in sample coverage. Analyses of the Urban Men’s Health Study and the San Francisco Young Men’s Health Study (Greenwood et al., 2001; Stall et al., 2001) found alcohol consumption, alcohol-related problems, polydrug use and sexual risk-taking to be associated with more frequent bar attendance. However, these studies did not include

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comparable information on women or heterosexual men. Thus it is still debatable to assert that gays, lesbians and bisexuals drink more and/or go to bars more relative to heterosexuals.

While bars are one venue of interest, it has also been noted that private parties are another context historically associated with heavier drinking (Clark, 1988; Fournier et al., 2004; Harford et al., 2002; Hussong, 2000). Parties, along with bars, are the settings at which the heavy per-occasion drinking occurs. Only a few studies have examined such contexts as a risk for heavier drinking and alcoholism in association with sexual identity/behavior (Mansergh et al., 2001; Mattison et al., 2001; Weinberg, 1994). Again, it is not known whether there are differences in attendance at such functions due to sexual identity and behavior.

Public and semi-public contexts, relative to one's home, provide unique opportunities for prevention and intervention. Because of this, we need a more accurate view of who participates in such contexts and what patterns of drinking are to be found in them. This is particularly true for gays, lesbians and bisexuals, because they are thought to have higher than average patronage of such settings and more overall drinking. Thus, the objective of this article is to examine the epidemiological patterns of alcohol contexts in relation to sexual identity by using a large, national, probability population survey. The research questions to be addressed here are: Do gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals spend more time at bars and parties than heterosexual groups? Are there differences in drinking in these contexts? And, finally, are context-based drinking patterns attributable to being gay/lesbian or to other confounding demographic and lifestyle patterns, such as relationship status or differences in age distribution?

Method

Data

The data used for this study are from the National Alcohol Survey conducted from November 1999 through June 2001. The overall sample consists of individuals 18 and older ($N = 7,612$) in all 50 states. Among respondents who answered the sexual orientation identity question (364 did not respond), 95.5% ($n = 6,924$) were classified as exclusively heterosexual, 2.0% ($n = 154$) identified as heterosexual while reporting same sex partners, 1.1% ($n = 77$) identified as bisexual and 1.2% ($n = 93$) identified as homosexual. Detailed information on the data collection methods, including the creation of variables measuring sexual identity, are given by Drabble et al. (this issue). Only the methods unique to this article are described here. SPSS 12 and Stata were used for the analyses (SPSS Inc., 2003; Stata Corp., 2003).

Alcohol and context variables

Context information was measured by a series of items covering six different contexts. However, in this article, we are presenting only two of these contexts: (1) bars, taverns or cocktail lounges and (2) a party in someone else's home. These are the two contexts in which the heaviest drinking occurs. Respondents were asked how often they go to these contexts and, when there, how much they drank on a typical occasion when alcohol was consumed. For the purpose of these analyses, the frequency of visiting these contexts was recoded into two categories: (1) less than once a month and (2) once a month or more. For contexts, the average total sample for women includes 2,403 heterosexuals, 60 heterosexuals with same sex partners, 34 bisexuals and 24 lesbians. For contexts for men, the average total sample includes 2,284 heterosexuals, 49 heterosexuals with same sex partners, 17 bisexuals and 32 gays. Amount of drinking was a continuous variable measured in drinks per occasion and included those who had drunk anything in that context. The total sample sizes for women were the following: heterosexual = 872; heterosexual with same sex partners = 35; bisexual = 24; and lesbian = 17. For men, the sample sizes were the following: heterosexual = 1,179; heterosexual with same sex partners = 25; bisexual = 9; and gay = 26.

Demographic variables

Other demographic variables used as control variables in the multivariate analyses include gender, age (18-29, 30-49, 50 or older), ethnicity (black, white, Hispanic, other), education (high school or less versus some college or more) and married/partnered status (married or living with someone as a couple versus all other categories).

Results

Figure 1 shows the distributional patterns by gender and sexual orientation of attending bars and parties; group differences are assessed with chi-square tests of significance. Among women, heterosexuals spend less time at bars and parties than the other groups of women. Less than 15% of heterosexual women go to bars as often as once a month, whereas nearly twice that percentage of women do so in all other groups ($\chi^2 = 26.84$, 3 df, $p < .000$). Gay men spend significantly more time in bars than the other groups ($\chi^2 = 20.45$, 3 df, $p < .000$). The pattern for women going to parties is similar to that of bars but not quite as extreme. With parties, the heterosexually identified women with same sex partners have the highest use of that context ($\chi^2 = 8.23$, 3 df, $p < .04$). As for men, bisexuals spend somewhat more time at parties, but this result is not significant.

Figure 2 (women) and Figure 3 (men) give the mean drinks per occasion for each of the groups, for both of

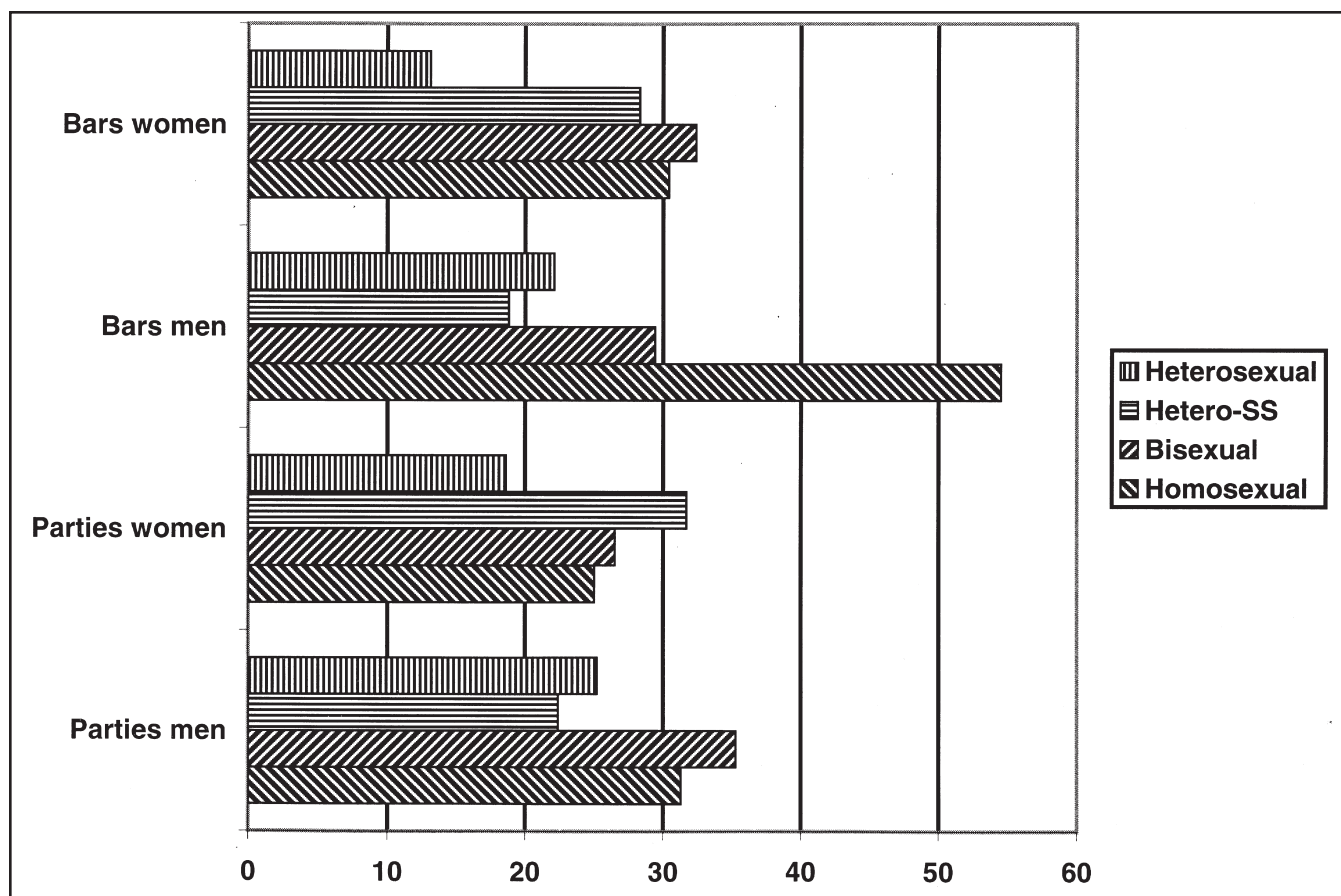


FIGURE 1. Percent of respondents spending time in each context at least 1+ month. SS = same sex.

these contexts. Tests of significance in these tables are analysis of variance (ANOVA) and include only those who drank in these contexts. Lesbian and exclusively heterosexual women (Figure 2) drink an average of about two drinks per occasion in each of these contexts. Bisexual women show the heaviest drinking pattern in each context; they drink an average of 3.3 drinks per occasion in bars and 3.1 drinks per occasion at parties (ANOVA $F = 9.14$, $p < .001$ for bars; ANOVA $F = 8.97$, $p < .001$ for parties). Heterosexual women with same sex partners drink more than lesbians and exclusively heterosexual women but not as much as the bisexual group. Figure 3 shows the results for mean drinks for the men in the sample who drank in each context. ANOVA shows that none of the groups of men differs significantly from any of the other groups; on the average men drink between two and a half to four drinks on an occasion in each context (ANOVA $F = 1.44$, $p < .23$ for bars, ANOVA $F = .60$, $p < .62$ for parties). There was an interesting (but nonsignificant) pattern for the men. Bisexual men drink somewhat more at parties and less at bars, but for gay men the pattern is reversed.

Multivariate analyses were also performed (tables not included) to determine whether differences in context pref-

erence and alcohol use within these contexts still showed the same association when adjusting for the key demographic variables of age, education, ethnicity and relationship status. The significant relationship between sexual orientation/behavior and context use or drinking was not attenuated by the entry of these other variables. For instance, bisexual and heterosexual women with same sex partners were still significantly more likely to go to bars and drink more within that context. Gay men were still more likely to go to bars when controlling for other demographic variables.

The demographic variables, however, explain additional variance in each model. In all of the multivariate models, younger age was found to be a significant risk factor for bar/party attendance as well as a risk factor for drinks per occasion. This is true for both men and women regardless of sexual orientation or behavior. For each context and for both genders, those with more education go more often but drink less per occasion. Among women, being of any other ethnic group than white is a protective factor against bar-going. Being African-American is a protective factor against greater consumption in both contexts for men and in bars

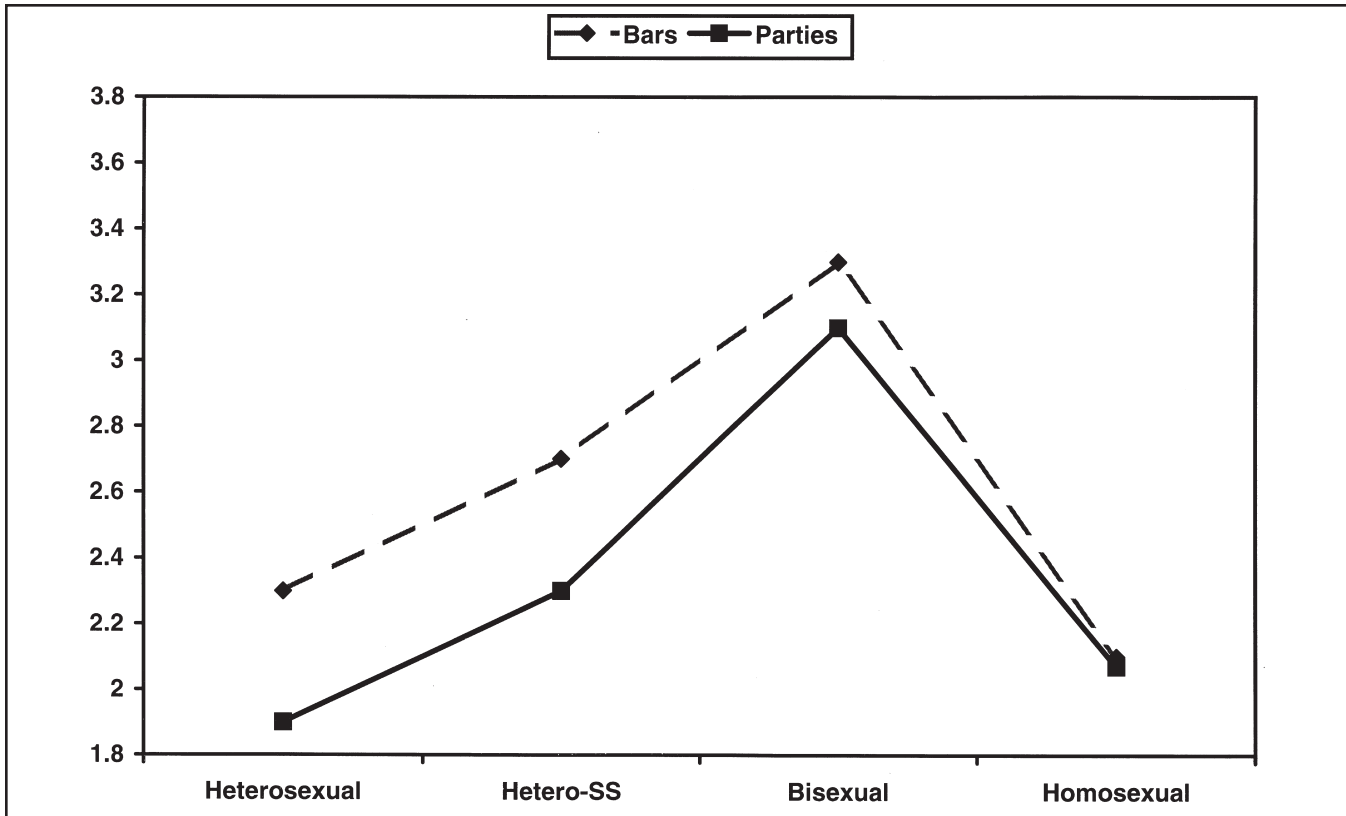


FIGURE 2. Mean drinks per occasion for women in each context by sexual orientation/behavior. SS = same sex.

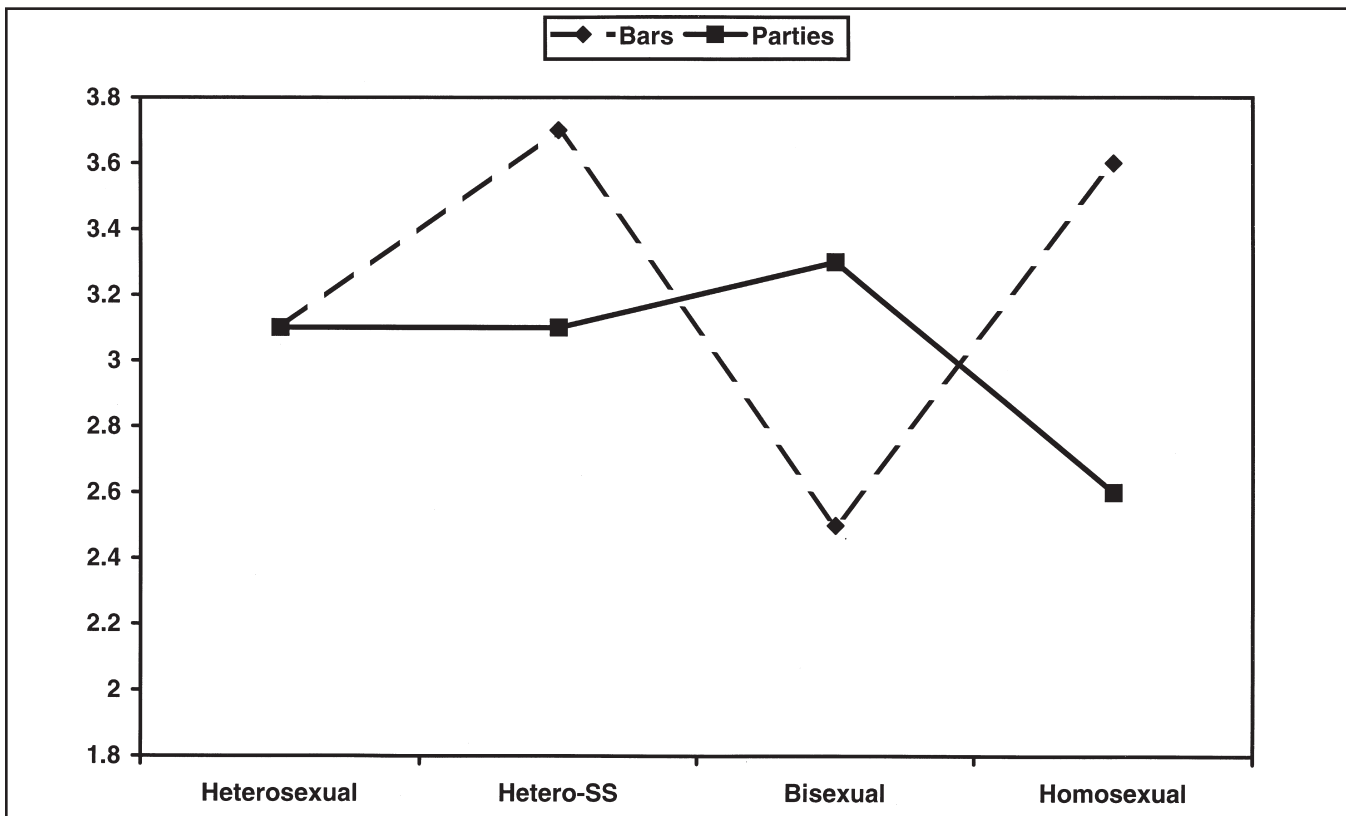


FIGURE 3. Mean drinks per occasion for men in each context by sexual orientation/behavior. SS = same sex.

for women. Finally, as one would expect, the lack of marriage or a live-in relationship increases the likelihood of going to parties and bars as well as greater consumption there.

Discussion

After controlling for demographic variables, gay men, lesbians and heterosexually identified women with same sex partners spend more time in bars than others. Bisexual women and heterosexual women with same sex partners drank more alcohol at bars than women who were exclusively heterosexual or homosexual. At parties, only the bisexual women drank significantly more than the other groups. Regardless of sexual orientation/behavior category and context, men drank about the same. Thus, while higher levels of context patronage match some common assumptions about gays and lesbians, drinking data do not. For instance, in the Drabble et al. (this issue) analysis, lesbians drink somewhat more overall, but results from analyses presented here do not support heavier drinking among lesbians in these specific contexts. Gay men go to bars far more than any other group, but neither their overall drinking patterns (Drabble et al., this issue) nor their within-context patterns differ from those of other men.

The current data, while having the advantage of national representativeness and a probability sample, still have limitations. The numbers of respondents in each group are small, and thus extreme or unusual values could result in biased findings. Furthermore, gay men, lesbians and bisexuals are subject to discrimination and social disapproval, thus making it possible that some respondents might not have disclosed sexual orientation information over the phone. There could be variations in how people report overall drinking relative to context-based drinking, which could account for some of the inconsistencies between overall drinking levels and context-based drinking.

Research on gays and lesbians suggests that involvement in drinking contexts such as bars and parties serves a unique function relative to heterosexuals. These contexts provide entry points into the homosexual community and provide opportunities to meet sociability needs, to develop a homosexual identity and to make contacts with extended social networks (Parks and Zetes-Zanatta, 1999; Weinberg, 1994). Klages (1984) says, "Many of the 'landmarks' of gay history are the bars, baths and clubs where, over the years, people who were homosexual went to be with other people like themselves" (p. 39). Heffernan (1998) found that bar-going rather than stress, coping style or lack of social support was associated with drinking among lesbians and that single lesbians were more likely to frequent bars. That study found that bar patronage was highly correlated with heavier consumption and suggested, ironically, that higher rates of drinking may be a reflection of positive participation in a lesbian community (Heffernan, 1998).

It has also been suggested that the use of alcohol in bars and other drinking contexts may serve to mediate stigma associated with being lesbian, gay or bisexual in a homophobic culture (McKirnan and Peterson, 1988, 1989). However, there is some evidence that homophobic attitudes and beliefs have changed over the last several decades. The General Social Survey (Treas, 2002) has a question on homosexuality that has been asked for several decades—specifically, whether sexual activity between two adults of the same sex is "wrong." In the early 1970s, 73% of respondents said that such behavior is "always wrong," but by 1998 that figure had dropped to 58%. The General Social Survey showed a temporary increase in negativity in the 1980s during the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, peaking at 78% in 1987. This suggests that, on the whole, expressed homophobia is declining, although there are still fluctuations, and more than half the population is disapproving of same sex relationships. One of the only studies to examine reasons for bar patronage among lesbians and gay men found that subjects reporting more experiences of discrimination were more likely to use bars for social support. They also found that significant proportions of lesbians and gay men used alcohol to cope with stress and that stress-related drinking was associated with heavier alcohol use and alcohol-related problems (McKirnan and Peterson, 1988, 1989). However, cross-sectional data cannot capture changing patterns of homophobia and how this might link to drinking patterns and use of contexts; longitudinal research is required to disentangle these interactions.

Given the problematic nature of the earlier data, the lack of longitudinal data and the inability to disentangle individual experiences of discrimination from generalized rates of homophobic attitudes, we are still left with unanswered questions about how these findings relate to stress, discrimination or any other theory. A key implication of the current study results is that associations between gay, lesbian and bisexual drinking and contexts of drinking are more complex than usually thought. Since the current study presents only epidemiological usage data, the question of why context use and drinking patterns differ in certain of the gay, lesbian and bisexual groups, relative to individuals who are exclusively heterosexual or across subgroups, is still to be answered. Further research is needed on the reasons for these contextual preferences and the circumstances under which such preferences might lead to problematic drinking and other risk behavior.

As we stated at the outset of this article, there has been a basic assumption in the literature that gays, lesbians and bisexuals drink more than other people. We have found that some of these groups favor certain contexts more and that a subset of these groups indeed drinks more. However, even if we had the necessary variables, theories such as those that hypothesize that drinking and context use are functions of discrimination or sociability needs cannot

adequately account for the uneven pattern found here. If discrimination and stigma were the cause, one would expect that it would have consistent effects across all groups. Additionally, we are unsure of the extent to which some of the earliest literature is valid because of the patchwork of subgroups studied, the lack of probability samples and other methodological flaws. Thus we cannot tell whether our data represent a change or whether differences are accounted for by methodological factors. Furthermore, the drinking patterns of gays, lesbians and bisexuals are nested within the drinking patterns of the society as a whole and are likely to rise and fall relative to overall behavior. This is further complicated by factors that uniquely affect some subgroups but not others, such as the threat of AIDS among men who have sex with men.

Future study is needed to investigate why such drinking and context use patterns are observed among bisexual women and women who categorize themselves as heterosexual but have same sex partners. The periodic National Alcohol Survey (conducted at 5-year intervals), on which these findings are based, will provide, by mid-decade, the opportunity to conflate data across years to more than double the available sample. This will allow for systematic testing of hypotheses about depression, differential exposure to interpersonal violence and other hypotheses suggested by researchers using convenience or regionally bounded samples. In addition, new items have been added to the National Alcohol Survey on stress, perceived discrimination, reasons for going to bars, experience of sexual assault and other traumas to test hypotheses suggested in the literature. In summary, this article presents findings that are both supportive and at variance with "conventional wisdom" about contexts and their association to sexual identity and behavior patterns.

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