

Understanding student drinking using individual and population based approaches

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Aim: To investigate patterns of student drinking at an individual and population level.

Design: Secondary analysis of retrospective previous week drinking diary information collected from participants recruited to a series of projects (January 2007-June 2010). Six projects collected online survey data. One of the six projects also collected Free Association Narrative Interview data.

Setting: Student participants drawn from seven UK universities.

Data analysis: Data were analysed using latent class cluster analysis to classify students into latent classes and investigate how these trajectories were associated with covariates of interest. Model fit was explored comparing log-likelihood statistics. Data from the Free Association Interview were analysed using the Free Association Analysis method of Hollway and Jefferson (2000).

Participants: 6152 participants had complete data for all outcomes and covariates of interest (85% undergraduate; mean age 22 years). In addition one of the three participants who undertook a narrative interview is included in the current abstract ('Susan').

Findings: To provide balance between simplicity and sufficient expression, the model with three latent classes was initially chosen. Class 1 (n=3499; 56.9%) comprised moderate drinkers, class 2 (n=2153; 35.0%) light drinkers, and class 3 (n=500; 8.1%) heavy drinkers. Mean weekly intakes were 21, <1, and 73 units respectively. Class profiles will be discussed in terms of graduate status, gender, age, and ethnicity.

Susan's reported drinking over the previous week would most likely place her in the 'heavy drinkers' class. Analysis of interview data revolved around three themes: lack of acknowledgement of the negative effects of drinking, low self-efficacy, and struggle with finding a sense of identity. The narrative provided by Susan provides insight into the experience of being a 'heavy drinker' student.

Conclusion: The latent class structure was informative with the model suggesting differing natural clusterings of trajectories of alcohol consumption over time that may be associated with characteristics of the student. By assessment of these characteristics, there may be opportunity to identify students who consume excess alcohol, and so permit targeting of a social intervention. The experience of Susan adds additional weight to the potential problems faced by 'heavy drinker' students and the need to ensure effective prevention and intervention treatments.