



The Interplay of Dating, Relationship Commitment, and Drinking Among College Students Participating in Group Drinking

Abstract

College students mostly drink in groups. However, there has been little research on the dynamics and relationships within these groups. Two basic questions are: “How does dating someone in a drinking group affect students drinking while in that group?” and “How does relationship commitment affect drinking?” This study suggests that being in a committed relationship decreases drinking whereas combining drinking and dating without commitment increases drinking to harmful levels.

Background

Drinking for most young people is a social and group activity (Lange & Voas, 2000). Even while acknowledging their importance, groups have remained largely unstudied within the college drinking literature. Using multiple research methods, we have begun the systematic examination of what we have coined collegiate “Natural Drinking Groups” (NDGs) (Lange et al., 2006). We define a NDG as a collection of two or more people organized to share a social activity centered on drinking who are bonded by friendship or other interpersonal relationships.

To our knowledge, no studies have tested the impact that dating someone within a NDG may have on drinkers, nor the impact that committed relationships may have on drinking.

In this study, we tested the effect of dating and relationship commitment on drinking among college students who participated in NDGs. NDG members almost always have preexisting social bonds. Some members may be in a committed relationship with someone in the NDG. Other members may be dating a group member without any serious commitment. Relationships may have profound effects on drinking behavior within the group.

Hypotheses

We expected a main effect of relationship commitment: Overall, committed relationships would have a protective effect on risky drinking, whether drinkers’ partners were present in the NDG or not. We expected an interaction effect between dating and relationship commitment such that dating in the NDG would only be protective if drinkers were in a committed relationship.

Method

This study was part of a larger online survey on alcohol and drug use conducted in the Spring of 2008 at a large university in the southwestern United States. The survey was sent to a sample of students randomly selected by the Registrar’s office. In one track of the survey, administered to 514 student drinkers, 414 students reported participation—in the past 28 days—in a group in which at least one person was drinking (i.e., an NDG).

Sample Characteristics:

- N = 414 drinkers who reported going out with an NDG within a month prior to the survey
- Gender: 63% Female participants (n=261)
- Age: M = 22.04 (SD=3.32)
- Race: 67% were White

Loraine Devos-Comby, PhD, Jason Daniel, MPH, & James E. Lange, PhD
San Diego State University

Independent Variables:

- Dating within the NDG: yes / no
- In a committed relationship: yes / no
- Caveat: Independence between these two factors was not obtained, as it often happens when considering natural categories. Among those in a committed relationship (N = 184), 59% dated someone in the NDG; among those not in a committed relationship (N = 187) only 11% dated in the NDG.

Outcome Measure:

Drinking quantity during the night that the NDG’s gathered was computed by summing the number of drinks reported for each location that the NDG went to. Six outliers whose total number of drinks was between 31 and 60 were excluded from the analysis. The valid values for this index ranged from 0 to 28 with 58 drinkers who declined to answer the questions related to number of drinks consumed. The final valid sample included 350 participants.

Results

We conducted an analysis of covariance on the number of drinks consumed in the NDG with relationship commitment and dating in the NDG as independent variables, and with age and gender as covariates (Table 1 & Figure 1).

Table 1. Analysis of covariance on number of drinks.

Relationship commitment:	F [1,292] = 14.91, p < .001
Dating:	F[1,292] = 3.47, p < .07
Interaction:	F[1,292] = 6.10, p < .02
Pairwise comparisons:	
a-b	F[1,292] = .32, ns
c-d	F[1,292] = 6.57, p < .02
a-c	F[1,292] = 13.31, p < .001
b-d	F[1,292] = 1.98, ns

We tested the same model on a series of variables pertaining to the NDGs to rule out the possibility that these effects could be accounted by differences in NDGs and in participants’ relations to the NDGs. Dating and relationship commitment had no significant effects on group size, number of drinkers in the group, participants’ identification and bond to the group. Thus, those who were in a committed relationship or not, and those who were dating someone in the NDG vs. not dating in the NDG, reported on drinking groups that were equal in sizes, proportion of drinkers in the NDG and that elicited the same levels of identification and bond from participants.

Lastly, we conducted another analysis of covariance on the number of drinks consumed in the NDG in which gender was entered as a third independent variable rather than a covariate. The goal was to test whether the interaction between dating and relationship commitment differed for men and women. This three-way interaction was not significant (F[1,289] = 1.14, ns), indicating that gender did not qualify the interaction presented in Figure 1 and the 2-way interaction remained significant in the model (F[1,289] = 4.35, p < .04).

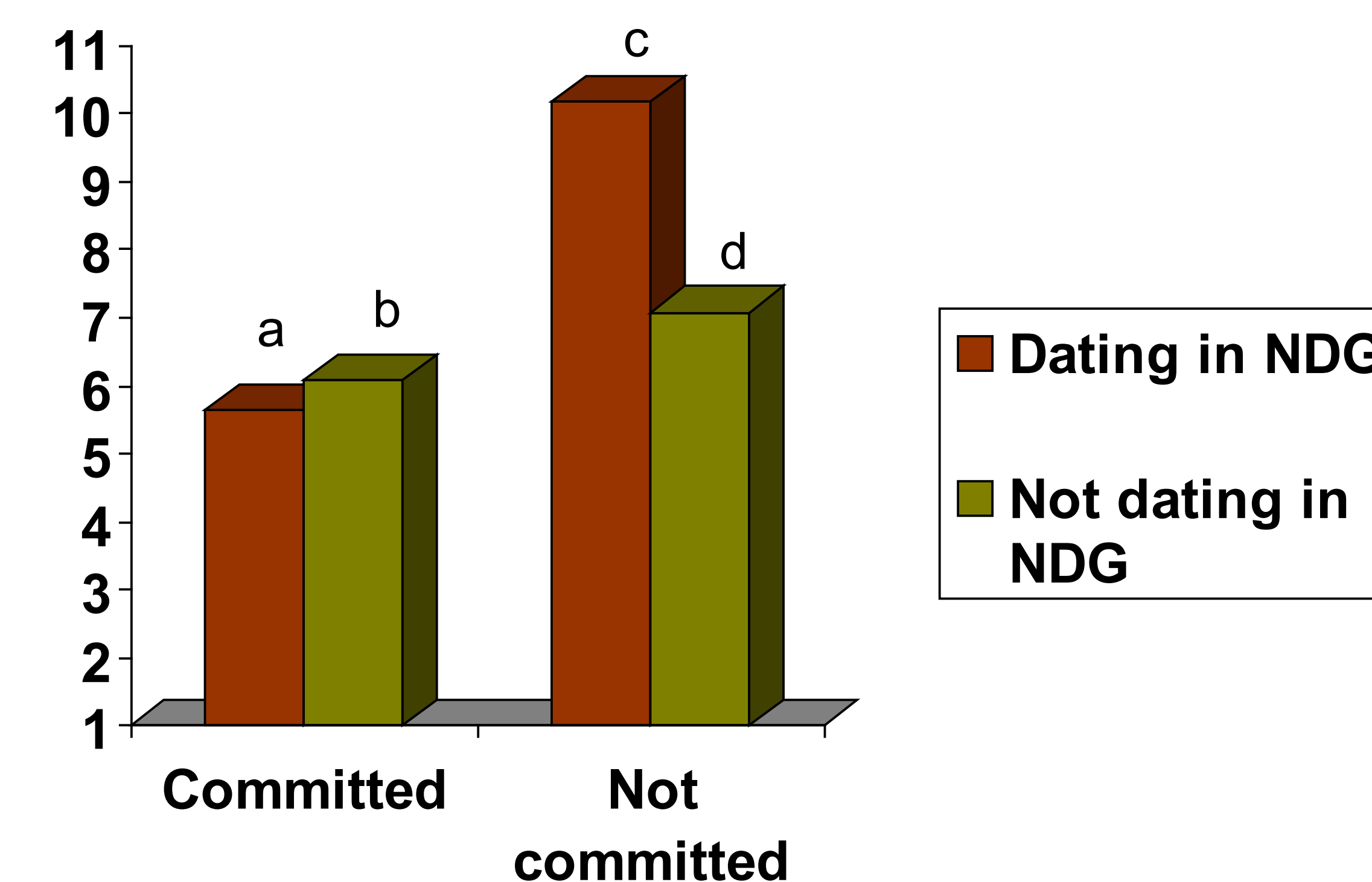


Figure 1. Number of Drinks Consumed in the NDG.

Conclusion

The lack of independence between dating in the NDG and relationship commitment requires caution when trying to interpret the main effect of a single factor such as relationship commitment. This should be less of a problem when interpreting the interaction, in particular when examining the significance of dating in NDGs for those in a non-committed relationship. Yet, such interaction would need to be replicated on larger samples.

For students who were not in committed relationships, dating in NDGs increased drinking to potentially harmful levels within those groups compared to drinkers who were not dating someone in their NDG.

Dating in the NDG or being in a committed relationship did not affect the size of the NDGs, the proportion of drinkers in the NDGs, or the identification and bond to those groups. Thus these group-related factors could not mediate the effect of dating and relationship commitment on drinking.

These results suggest that prevention efforts should 1) reinforce the role of partners in committed relationships as agents of safer drinking, 2) address the increased risks associated with combining casual dating and group drinking.

References

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