



# How acceptable are intoxicated behaviors? Discrepancy between personal versus perceived approval



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- SODs exist between personal and perceived approval of intoxicated behaviors.
- Women have larger SODs relative to men.
- Minority students had larger SODs relative to white students.
- Women are less approving of intoxicated behavior relative to men.
- Minority students are less approving of intoxicated behaviors relative to white students.

## ARTICLE INFO

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** College students report high rates of binge drinking yet they reliably endorse elevated perceptions of drinking by their peers. However, the drinking norms literature offers little insight into how college students think about behaviors exhibited while intoxicated. This study aims to determine (a) if the predicted self-other differences (SODs) are seen among college students with respect to approval of intoxicated behaviors and (b) whether gender and race/ethnicity moderate these differences. We hypothesized that students would perceive others as more approving of intoxicated behaviors than they were themselves, resulting in significant SODs. We also predicted that women would have larger SODs relative to their male counterparts, and minority students would have larger SODs relative to their white counterparts.

**Methods:** Participants ( $N = 233$ , 63% female) were recruited from an introductory psychology course at a large public northeastern university. They completed online surveys that assessed demographics, and responded to a list of intoxicated behaviors with ratings of personal approval and perceived peer approval.

**Results:** Perceived others' approval ratings exceeded personal approval ratings for 42 of the 44 different intoxicated behaviors. Women had significantly higher SODs relative to men and differed on personal approval. Non-white students had significantly higher SODs relative to white students, and differed both on personal approval and perceptions of others' approval of intoxicated behaviors.

**Conclusions:** Consistent SODs were observed in the approval of intoxicated behaviors. These findings may help to inform normative feedback interventions by revealing the potential for normative pressure, especially for non-white students.

## 1. Introduction

Young adults, ages 18–25, are at higher risk than any other age group for experiencing alcohol problems. Nearly 38% report engaging in binge drinking (i.e., drinking 5 + drinks on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30) (SAMHSA, 2015). Binge drinking is associated with various acute health risks such as cognitive impairment, compromised motor skills, and severely hindered executive decision-

making (Zeigler et al., 2005). Excessive drinking may increase the likelihood that students will engage in risky behaviors such as drinking and driving, physical violence, and unsafe sex practices (Eaton et al., 2011).

Risky drinking patterns are influenced by environmental and social-cognitive factors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Wood, Read, Palfai, & Stevenson, 2001). One such factor is social norms. Social norms related to drinking have been operationalized as descriptive

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norms (i.e., the perceived drinking behavior of one's peers) and injunctive norms (i.e., the perceived approval of drinking behaviors); both predict college students' drinking behavior (Borsari & Carey, 2003). Students who report higher perceived descriptive norms for drinking among their peers drink more heavily themselves (Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Regarding injunctive norms, the perception that friends and peers are more approving of risky drinking predicts alcohol consumption both cross-sectionally (Neighbors et al., 2007; Neighbors et al., 2008) and prospectively (Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004).

Further, students tend to overestimate peers' consumption (descriptive norms) and approval (injunctive norms) relative to their own alcohol consumption and approval (Baer & Carney, 1993; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). These discrepancies have been referred to as self-other differences (SODs). A meta-analysis by Borsari and Carey (2003) documented significant SODs for both descriptive and injunctive norms, with SODs for injunctive norms exceeding those of descriptive norms. In other words, greater discrepancies arise when drinkers estimate others' approval of drinking behaviors relative to their own approval, when compared to estimates of others' actual drinking (which could be observed) relative to their own drinking. Exaggerated perceptions of injunctive norms have potential to influence individuals' drinking independently and perhaps synergistically with exaggerated perceptions of descriptive norms (Reid, Cialdini, & Aiken, 2010). Because descriptive norms have been examined extensively throughout the alcohol norms literature, the present study focuses on injunctive norms in light of expectations that SODs will be most pronounced when individuals are trying to estimate others' non-observable attitudes.

SODs may be larger to the extent that a person is overestimating the positivity of peers' attitudes. Alternatively, a large SOD might exist because a person currently has a relatively low personal attitude toward drinking. In either case, the greater the mismatch between one's personal beliefs and what is perceived, the more pressure one may feel to change personal attitudes to fit the norm. Large SODs for injunctive norms (reflecting elevated estimates of peer approval) are consistent with the theoretical concept of pluralistic ignorance (Prentice & Miller, 1993), which refers to when individuals within a group internally reject a norm and overestimate its acceptance among others. Although individuals within a group may hold more conservative views, they may behave similarly to the larger group in an effort to "fit in". This may lead to increases in drinking over time. Indeed, Carey, Borsari, Carey, and Maisto (2006) show that larger SODs for descriptive norms predict increases in future drinking (1 month later). Although no prospective studies have yet demonstrated this effect for injunctive SODs, it follows that large SODs regarding perceived peer attitudes toward drinking may influence one's later attitudes toward drinking and actual drinking behaviors.

SODs in injunctive norms have been studied in relation to some behavioral targets, such as drinking levels, protective behavioral strategies, and alcohol-related consequences. For example, students view themselves as less approving of alcohol use (Borsari & Carey, 2003) and risky drinking behaviors (i.e., drinking alcohol every weekend, drinking daily, driving after drinking, drinking enough to blackout) than peers (LaBrie, Hummer, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2010; Prentice & Miller, 1993). College students also express lower personal approval of consequences than their friends, but higher approval of alcohol-related protective strategies (DeMartini, Carey, Lao, & Luciano, 2011).

A distinction can be made between alcohol-related consequences, many of which are longer-term effects that occur after a drinking episode (e.g., hangovers, blackouts, poor grades, neglecting obligations), and behaviors that occur while one is acutely under the influence of alcohol. Intoxicated behaviors can include slurring speech, difficulty walking, becoming aggressive, or losing something valuable (Westmaas, Moeller, & Woicik, 2007). In the current study, we focus on intoxicated behaviors that individuals display when the person is actively drinking or intoxicated, because evaluations of these in-the-

moment experiences may have a greater effect on future decision-making than more distal consequences (Westmaas et al., 2007). Perceived approval of intoxicated behaviors may be proximal predictors of drinking decisions. In the context of intoxicated behaviors, large SODs would reflect that students perceive their peers to be much more approving of specific intoxicated behaviors in comparison to their own level of approval.

In order to address the gap in the literature on SODs for injunctive norms of intoxicated behaviors in particular, identifying factors associated with the magnitude of SODs can be informative. If SODs represent a combination of two components (personal approval and injunctive norms (perceived approval) toward intoxicated behaviors), then factors that contribute to variability in either component should also influence the size and variance of SODs. Gender is one such factor. Women are often less approving of drinking behaviors and tend to rate alcohol consequences more negatively than males (Barnett, Goldstein, Murphy, Colby, & Monti, 2006; Gaher & Simons, 2007; Larimer, Irvine, Kilmer, & Marlatt, 1997; Prentice & Miller, 1993). If women express lower levels of personal approval of intoxicated behaviors, even if they do not differ in their perceived approval ratings relative to men, then we might expect that they would experience larger SODs for approval of intoxicated behaviors than men. Indeed, Borsari and Carey (2003) reported larger SODs for women than men across a range of types of injunctive norms (not including intoxicated behaviors). Similarly, larger SODs were seen in women relative to men with regard to approval of alcohol consequences and protective behavioral strategies (DeMartini et al., 2011).

Another variable of interest is racial/ethnic minority status. Attitudes and drinking behavior vary among racial and ethnic groups due in part to different cultural norms and religious beliefs (Galvan & Caetano, 2003). Most heavy drinking college students tend to be Caucasian males (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994). In contrast, black (compared to white) students are less likely to indulge in risky drinking and experience significantly fewer consequences of heavy drinking (Meilman, Presley, & Lyster, 1994; O'Malley & Johnston, 2002). Though research demonstrating racial or ethnic differences in injunctive norms or attitudes toward drinking behaviors is lacking, racial/ethnic differences in the behaviors themselves suggest that such attitude differences may also exist. If minority students report more conservative attitudes toward intoxicated behaviors, they may therefore have larger SODs than white students who are in the majority on campus.

### 1.1. The current study

The present study examines self-other differences (SODs) for college students' ratings of the approval of intoxicated behaviors. Our first objective was to determine if significant differences exist between students' personal approval and perceived approval of student peers. Consistent with prior literature on other behavioral targets (e.g., DeMartini et al., 2011), we hypothesized that students would perceive others as more approving of intoxicated behaviors than they are themselves. The secondary objective of this study was to identify demographic factors associated with SODs. We tested the hypotheses that women would have greater SODs than males, and that minority students would have greater SODs than White students.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants ( $N = 234$ ) were recruited from an introductory psychology course at a large public university in the northeastern United States. All signed up for an online survey titled "Attitudes about Drinking" in partial fulfillment of course requirements. Participants reported to the research office where they were informed about the

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