



## Benefit finding as a moderator of the relationship between spirituality/religiosity and drinking



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We evaluated benefit finding as a moderator of drinking.
- Benefit finding and spirituality/religiosity interacted to predict drinking.
- Low benefit finding and spirituality/religiosity are linked with increased risk.

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### ABSTRACT

This study evaluated benefit finding as a moderator of the relationship between spiritual and religious attitudes and drinking. Previous research indicates that undergraduates who drink heavily experience negative alcohol-related consequences. Literature also suggests that spirituality and religiosity (S/R) are protective against heavy drinking (e.g., Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012) and that finding meaning, which is conceptually related to benefit finding, is negatively associated with alcohol use (e.g., Wells, 2010). Seven hundred undergraduate students completed the study materials including measures of drinking, benefit finding, and S/R. Based on previous research, we expected that S/R and benefit finding would be negatively associated with drinking. Furthermore, we expected that benefit finding would moderate the association between S/R and drinking, such that S/R would be more negatively associated with drinking among those higher in benefit finding. Consistent with expectations, a negative association between S/R and drinking was present, and was stronger among those high in benefit finding. These findings extend previous research by demonstrating that the protective effect of S/R on drinking appears to be particularly true among those who find benefit following stressful experiences. This study extends previous research showing that S/R is negatively associated with drinking by evaluating benefit finding (measured via the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) as a potential moderator of the relationship between S/R and drinking. This study contributes to the alcohol literature seeking to understand and identify individual factors in drinking and determine how S/R and benefit finding relate to drinking.

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### 1. Introduction

In 2009, the U.S. Surgeon General declared reducing heavy drinking among college students as a major health goal for the nation (U.S. Department of Health et al., 2009). Thus, research on undergraduate drinking behavior is a high priority. Although most U.S. college students are under the legal drinking age of 21, most drinkers report their heaviest drinking habits to be between the ages of 18 and 21 (Chen & Kandel, 1995). Additionally, research indicates that college

students are more likely to drink heavily than their non-college peers (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2012). An estimated 80% of college students drink (Johnston et al., 2012), and approximately 2 in 5 college students are heavy episodic drinkers (more than five drinks in a row during the past two weeks; SAMHSA, 2008; Wechsler, Kuo, Lee, & Dowdall, 2000). Heavy drinkers are more prone to a vast array of potential consequences such as academic difficulties, trouble with authorities, hangovers, injuries (Hingson, 2010; Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, & Moeykens, 1994; Wechsler et al., 2000), antisocial behavior, health and psychosocial problems (Wechsler et al., 2000), depression (Geisner, Larimer, & Neighbors, 2004), eating disorders (Dunn, Larimer, & Neighbors, 2002), risky

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sexual behavior, and sexual assault (Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, & Saenz, 2003; Kaysen, Neighbors, Martell, Fossos, & Larimer, 2006; Koss & Gaines, 1993; Larimer, Lydum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999). Moreover, although 20% of undergraduates meet DSM-IV criteria for alcohol dependence or abuse, less than 5% seek alcohol treatment or counseling (NIAAA, 2007). Therefore, further research is needed to understand the behaviors that protect against alcohol abuse in order to reduce drinking problems among this at-risk group.

### 1.1. Spirituality/religiosity

Literature suggests that spirituality/religiosity (S/R) is protective against heavy drinking (e.g., Yonker et al., 2012). More specifically, religiosity has been associated with lower frequency and quantity of drinking among college students (e.g., Schall, Kemeny, & Maltzman, 1992; Slicker, 1997). Furthermore, higher reported religious faith has been shown to be associated with a decrease in the likelihood of alcohol-related problems (Strawser, Storch, Geffken, Killiany, & Baumeister, 2004). Religiosity is also generally associated with organized systems and group practices (Larson, Swyers, & McCullough, 1997), whereas spirituality has commonly been discussed in the context of an individual's perspective and journey for existential meaning or deferring to a higher power (Larson et al., 1997; Miller & Thoresen, 1999; Pargament, 1997; Pargament & Park, 1997). Although separately defined, spirituality and religiosity are closely related and thus are frequently discussed in tandem. Recent research has evaluated S/R as a composite measure of personal devotion and theological pursuit within a defined community and has been shown to be negatively associated with alcohol use (DeHaan, Yonker, & Affholter, 2011; Drerup, Johnson, & Bindl, 2011).

Several factors have been evaluated in considering the protective effects of S/R on drinking. These factors include the impact of S/R on social influences that surround drinking behaviors, the promotion of specific beliefs or values that discourage drinking behaviors, and the positive effect of S/R on well-being, which protects against negative drinking behaviors (Gorsuch, 1995; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Miller, 1998). It is also possible that S/R provides individuals with coping mechanisms for dealing with stress, whereas individuals low in S/R may turn to alcohol to help cope with stress (Johnson, Sheets, & Kristeller, 2008).

It is important to also note that although the majority of studies provide evidence that a negative relationship exists between S/R and drinking, a few studies have reported conflicting results (Burris, Sauer, & Carlson, 2011; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). Part of this conflict might be attributed to extensive variance in the operationalization and evaluation of S/R (see Corwyn & Benda, 2000, for a review). Additionally, some studies have demonstrated that intrinsic S/R (i.e., S/R that is internally motivated, such as praying to a higher being) is negatively associated with alcohol use among college students, but this relationship was not evident for extrinsic S/R (i.e., S/R that is externally motivated, such as attending religious services to seek approval or avoid social repercussions; Galen & Rogers, 2004; Templin & Martin, 1999). Furthermore, students' S/R has been shown to moderate the general use of alcohol and heavy episodic drinking in early college years, but the protective effect diminished as students reached upper-class levels, even as levels of S/R remained constant (Stewart, 2001). These findings underscore the importance of considering individual factors that might moderate the relationship between S/R and drinking behaviors.

### 1.2. Benefit finding

One such individual factor that warrants further research is benefit finding. Benefit finding is closely related to finding meaning and has been operationalized as a proclivity for perceiving positive outcomes following stressful or traumatic events (e.g., Steffen, 2011;

Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). For example, benefit finding might manifest via seeing trials as opportunities for personal growth, building faith, practicing patience, or believing that all things work together for good. Benefit finding has previously been associated with various health-related outcomes, such as adaptive responses to cancer, positive affect, wisdom, spiritual well-being, and positive lifestyle changes (Costa & Pakenham, 2012). Prior research also demonstrates clear and positive associations between benefit finding and S/R. For example, benefit finding and S/R have been associated with decreased concern with body appearance and increased use of adaptive coping strategies in menopausal women (Steffen, 2011). Additionally, benefit finding and coping strategies have led to less feelings of isolation in women who have suffered childhood sexual abuse (Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007). Furthermore, benefit finding has served as a buffer against post-traumatic stress disorder in extended combat situations (Wood, Britt, Wright, Thomas, & Bliese, 2012).

Given these findings, individual differences in drinking might be explained by evaluating benefit finding as a moderator of the relationship between S/R and drinking behaviors. Benefit finding might be a key operationalization of spiritual practice in that low benefit finding may be characteristic of individuals who report high S/R but engage in risky alcohol use. Conversely, it is possible that high benefit finding may serve as a buffer against risky alcohol behaviors for those who are high in S/R. In other words, it is likely that the protective effect of S/R against drinking might be stronger among those high in benefit finding compared to those low in benefit finding. It stands to reason that individuals high in S/R and benefit finding might take on a more global perspective regarding traumatic or stressful events such that these events are viewed as learning opportunities or hurdles that can be overcome through reliance on a higher power.

Benefit finding may also be one particular coping mechanism available to individuals practicing S/R. Concurrently, religion often promotes benefit finding as a component of S/R practices, which may then mean these individuals do not feel the need to cope with stress by using alcohol or other substances. Religious coping has previously been shown to moderate the relationship between stress and alcohol use among female college students (Stoltzfus & Farkas, 2012), and benefit finding was shown to lower levels of stress and post-traumatic stress following the September 11th terrorist attacks (Poulin, Silver, Gil-Rivas, Holman, & McIntosh, 2009). Additionally, heavy drinkers often use alcohol to cope with negative emotions (Ostafin & Brooks, 2011). As such, it is likely that benefit finding may provide psychological relief following stressful events which might otherwise be associated with heavier drinking. Based on this rationale, and consistent with the literature, we expected that those high in S/R would drink less, and this would be especially true among those higher in benefit finding.

### 1.3. Current study

The present study extends previous research which shows that S/R is negatively associated with drinking by evaluating benefit finding as a potential moderator of the relationship between S/R and alcohol consumption. Based on previous research, we expected that S/R and benefit finding would be negatively associated with drinking. Furthermore, we expected that benefit finding would moderate the association between S/R and drinking such that S/R would be more negatively associated with drinking among those higher in benefit finding. The present study was designed to evaluate the relationship between S/R and drinking by considering benefit finding as a potential moderator. Thus, we hypothesized that: both S/R (1A) and benefit finding (1B) would be negatively associated with drinking, and (2) benefit finding would moderate the association between S/R and drinking such that the relationship between S/R and drinking would be negative, and this would be stronger among those high in benefit finding.

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