



# Incorporating social anxiety into a model of college student problematic drinking

Lindsay S. Ham<sup>a,b,\*,1</sup>, Debra A. Hope<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Center for Drug and Alcohol Programs, Medical University of South Carolina, 67 President Street,  
P.O. Box 250861, Charleston, SC 29425, USA

<sup>b</sup>University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

## Abstract

College problem drinking and social anxiety are significant public health concerns with highly negative consequences. College students are faced with a variety of novel social situations and situations encouraging alcohol consumption. The current study involved developing a path model of college problem drinking, including social anxiety, in 316 college students referred to an alcohol intervention due to a campus alcohol violation. Contrary to hypotheses, social anxiety generally had an inverse relationship with problem drinking. As expected, perceived drinking norms had important positive, direct effects on drinking variables. However, the results generally did not support the hypotheses regarding the mediating or moderating function of the valuations of expected effects and provided little support for the mediating function of alcohol expectancies in the relations among social anxiety and alcohol variables. Therefore, it seems that the influence of peers may be more important for college students than alcohol expectancies and valuations of alcohol's effects are. College students appear to be a unique population in respect to social anxiety and problem drinking. The implications of these results for college prevention and intervention programs were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Problem drinking among college students represents a major public health concern. Although problematic alcohol use occurs across many age groups, young adults aged 18–

\* Corresponding author. Center for Drug and Alcohol Programs, Medical University of South Carolina, 67 President Street, P.O. Box 250861, Charleston, SC 29425, USA. Tel.: +1-843-792-5550; fax: +1-843-792-7353.  
E-mail address: [haml@musc.edu](mailto:haml@musc.edu) (L.S. Ham).

<sup>1</sup> Florida International University, Department of Psychology, University Park, Miami, FL 33199.

24 show the highest rates of alcohol use and have the greatest percentage of problem drinkers (Kandel & Logan, 1984; US Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1984, 1997). The majority of college students have consumed alcohol in the past year (over 80% throughout the 1990s; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2000), with at least 40% reporting a recent heavy or binge drinking episode (5+ standard drinks for men, 4+ for women in one sitting) in national studies (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeyskens, & Castillo, 1994; Wechsler, Dowdall, Maenner, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000).

The pattern of college drinking is unique because it seems to be relatively variable and has a transitory course with only a subset of students exhibiting heavy drinking patterns into adulthood (Weingardt et al., 1998). Although many students “mature out” of heavy drinking (Zucker, 1987), some do not (e.g., Marlatt, Larimer, Baer, & Quigley, 1993; Weingardt et al., 1998). Moreover, heavy drinking puts these students at risk for experiencing significant, negative alcohol-related consequences during their college years. Since the mid-1990s, there has been greater media attention given to alcohol-related deaths among college students, including deaths by acute alcohol poisoning, falls, drownings, automobile collisions, fires, and hypothermia resulting from exposure (Wechsler et al., 2000). However, there is a multitude of other less severe negative consequences more commonly experienced by heavy drinkers that may be neglected by the media (e.g., unplanned sexual activity, hangovers, academic problems, legal problems, and lowered immunity; Engs & Aldo-Benson, 1995; Wechsler et al., 1994).

Unfortunately, problem drinkers are not the only individuals who are affected by their drinking behavior. Heavy drinking also endangers other drinking or nondrinking college students and the community in general. In addition to the experience of “secondhand effects” of binge drinking on others (e.g., being insulted or humiliated, experiencing unwanted sexual advances, and having interrupted sleep; Wechsler, 1996), there is an increase in physical or sexual assault or damaging property committed by students when intoxicated (Hingston, Heeren, Zakocs, Kopstein, & Wechsler, 2002; Wechsler et al., 1994). Approximately 32% of college drinkers report driving under the influence of alcohol (Wechsler et al., 1994), putting themselves and others at risk for injury and death.

### *1.1. Defining problem drinking in college students*

Previous research has often utilized self-report measures assessing the quantity and/or frequency of drinking behavior. Many have asserted that using quantity and frequency measures of alcohol use is not sufficient to determine the problem status of college student drinkers. For instance, some heavy drinkers may report low levels of alcohol-related problems, while some light or moderate drinkers may experience high levels of alcohol-related problems (White & Labouvie, 1989). As much of the concern with college student drinking deals with the negative alcohol-related consequences, this seems to be a relevant definition. Thus, the current study examined both weekly alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems.

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