



Trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking: An examination of young adults in the US and Sweden[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Positive alcohol expectancies and alcohol use tend to increase from adolescence to young adulthood, yet little is known about the associations between these constructs across cultures. The current study adds to the extant literature by examining the growth trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior among United States (US) and Swedish participants during a critical period where significant change in these outcomes may be expected to occur. A total of 870 (US, $N = 362$; Sweden, $N = 508$) high school seniors completed baseline, 6-month, and 12-month assessments of alcohol expectancies and drinking (i.e., drinks per week). Changes in positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior were examined using a parallel process latent growth model. In both samples, higher baseline levels of positive alcohol expectancies were associated with a higher number of drinks consumed per week at baseline. In the US sample, lower baseline levels of positive alcohol expectancies were associated with a greater increase in positive alcohol expectancies at 12-month follow-up, and lower baseline levels of drinks per week were associated with a greater increase in drinks consumed per week at 12-month follow-up. In the Swedish sample, an increase in positive alcohol expectancies over time was associated with an increase in drinks consumed per week over the same period of time. Additional research is needed to examine when and for whom expectancy-based alcohol interventions are most efficacious.

1. Introduction

The period of time immediately following high school has been identified as a critical period for alcohol use initiation and escalation (Bachman et al., 2014; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1999; Maggs & Schulenberg, 2004). As such, the identification of predictors of alcohol use initiation and escalation among late adolescents and early young adults has been an area of intense research. One predictor, alcohol expectancies, has been found to be among the strongest predictors of drinking behavior after controlling for the effects of other predictors (Jester et al., 2015). Alcohol expectancies are defined as the perceived consequences (positive or negative) that are anticipated by an individual as a result of the consumption of alcohol (Chen et al., 2011). Studies conducted in the United States (US) and abroad have examined the relationship between expectancies and drinking behavior (Iwamoto, Corbin, Lejuez, & MacPherson, 2014; Patrick, Wray-Lake,

Finlay, & Maggs, 2010; Shell, Newman, & Xiaoyi, 2010), yet few studies have examined the relationship between these constructs prospectively (Mitchell, Beals, & Kaufman, 2006; Patrick et al., 2010). The current study aims to fill these gaps in the literature.

1.1. Relationship between alcohol expectancies and drinking

Positive alcohol expectancies, by definition, are positive consequences that an individual anticipates will result from the consumption of alcohol, including feeling more sociable, courageous, and/or peaceful. Although negative alcohol expectancies have been reported to be associated with alcohol abstinence, positive alcohol expectancies have been identified as a much stronger predictor of drinking among individuals under 35 years of age, particularly with respect to alcohol consumption and hazardous drinking (Bot, Engels, & Knibbe, 2005; Leigh & Stacy, 2004; Zamboanga, Horton, Leitkowski, & Wang, 2006).

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Research indicates that positive alcohol expectancies are a strong predictor of drinking frequency and hazardous drinking (Bot et al., 2005; Leigh & Stacy, 2004; Zamboanga et al., 2006), account for unique variance in drinking behavior (Jester et al., 2015), and have served as the sole expectancy-based unit of analysis in other studies (Iwamoto et al., 2014). Thus, changes in positive alcohol expectancies during a critical juncture in the lives of young adults will likely be more strongly associated with changes in the trajectory of drinking than negative alcohol expectancies.

1.2. Trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking

Numerous studies have examined the developmental trajectory of positive alcohol expectancies in the US. It has been suggested that alcohol expectancies form around age 10 and are well formed by age 12 (Christiansen, Smith, Roehling, & Goldman, 1989; Thush & Wiers, 2007). During adolescence, a gradual shift occurs where individuals report more positive than negative alcohol expectancies (Chen et al., 2011; Miller, Smith, & Goldman, 1990), however this increase in positive alcohol expectancies has been found to level-off during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. For example, Sher, Wood, Wood, & Raskin (1996) reported that positive alcohol expectancies plateau and stabilize during young adulthood. The extent to which the development and trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies in the US are similar to that of Sweden is unclear given the paucity and cross-sectional nature of previous studies (e.g., Andersson, Johnsson, Berglund, & Öjehagen, 2007; Ståhlbrandt et al., 2008). In terms of normative drinking trajectories in the US, individuals start drinking during adolescence, increase their drinking behavior throughout young adulthood, and tend to decrease their drinking behavior by their mid-twenties (Bachman et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 1999; Maggs & Schulenberg, 2004). In comparison to the US, similar normative drinking trajectories have been reported in Sweden (Wennberg & Andersson, 2013), although a recent decline in alcohol consumption among men, women, and those under 50 years of age has also been observed (Raninen, Leifman, & Ramstedt, 2013).

In a seminal study, Mitchell et al. (2006) reported a significant relationship between the development of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior, with greater increases in expectancies associated with greater increases in drinking over time. Moreover, participants with higher baseline positive alcohol expectancies increased their drinking behavior less quickly over time compared to participants with lower baseline positive expectancies score. This study suggests that the growth trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior “move” together across adolescence in the US, but it is unclear whether this relationship is observed in young adulthood given that the trajectory of positive alcohol expectancies reportedly levels-off while drinking behavior increases during this developmental period (Bachman et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 1999; Maggs & Schulenberg, 2004; Sher et al., 1996).

In a study conducted in a country more comparable to Swedish culture, Aas et al. (1998) examined the longitudinal relationship between alcohol expectancies and drinking among seventh-grade students in Norway. Among all respondents, positive alcohol expectancies predicted drinking prospectively and, reciprocally, drinking predicted alcohol expectancies. Moreover, positive alcohol expectancies increased for most drinker groups from 7th to 9th grade suggesting that the trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies in Sweden may be similar to the trajectories reported in the US among adolescents, findings which may generalize to young adults in Sweden.

1.3. Cultural differences in the expectancy-drinking relationship

Culture is defined as the socially shared beliefs, values, expectations, norms, and practices within a country, region, or group (Betancourt & López, 1993). Cultural differences could exist between countries as well as within countries. For example, cultural factors

could explain differences in policy decisions regarding the accessibility of alcohol in the US and Sweden (Ståhlbrandt et al., 2008), with the legal age of possession and purchase of alcohol in the US (21 years old) differing from that of Sweden (20 years old for state-controlled liquor outlets and 18 years old for restaurants). Moreover, regional differences in alcohol use have also been observed in northern and southern Sweden (Gustafsson, 2010), and in other countries (Shell et al., 2010). Examining the relationship between alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior in the US and Sweden, with different regulations associated with the age at which alcohol can be legally purchased, would provide a more nuanced investigation into whether social and cultural factors influence the relationship between alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior.

1.4. Current study

It has been suggested that the relationship between positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior may vary as function of whether these constructs are examined in adolescence or young adulthood (Sher et al., 1996). Moreover, this relationship may vary as a function of whether participants reside in the US or Sweden (Shell et al., 2010). The current study was designed to examine the growth trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior from students' senior year in high school to after high school in the US and Sweden. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that positive alcohol expectancies will remain stable while the number of drinks participants consume per week will increase during the year following participants' baseline assessment in both the US and Swedish samples (Bachman et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 1999; Maggs & Schulenberg, 2004; Sher et al., 1996). The current study is in response to calls for the examination of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior prospectively (e.g., Baer, 2002), as well as the need to examine the extent to which trajectories of positive alcohol expectancies and drinking behavior vary between US and Swedish young adults.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in the current study were US and Swedish high school seniors who completed a baseline assessment and two follow-ups at 6-months and 12-months post-baseline as part of a larger longitudinal study. The current study included only participants who were randomized to the assessment-only control group and who reported consuming alcohol during one of the three follow-up assessments. The US sample included 362 high school seniors (63% female) from 22 high schools across the state of Washington in the United States and 508 high school seniors (67% female) from 17 high schools in the province of Scania in Sweden for a total sample of 870 participants.

At baseline, Swedish participants ($M = 17.81$, $SD = 0.50$) were significantly older than U.S. participants ($M = 17.53$, $SD = 0.51$), ($t(868) = -8.17$, $p < 0.001$). In the U.S., 76.4% identified as White, 4.2% as Asian, 2.5% as Black, 1.4% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1.7% as Native Hawaiian or other Asian Pacific Islander, 7.3% as “more than one race,” and 6.5% as other. In terms of ethnicity in the total sample, 12% identified as Hispanic or Latino. Because it is culturally inappropriate to inquire about race and ethnicity in Sweden, these constructs were not assessed in the Swedish sample. Rates of college attendance in the US (89.2%) and Sweden (81.5%) varied at 6-month follow-up, with more Swedish participants (18.5%) than expected reporting not having attended college compared to US participants, (10.8%), $\chi^2(1, N = 870) = 9.75$, $p = 0.01$.

2.2. Procedure

In the United States, research staff visited classrooms to recruit high

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