



# Change in college students' perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use and its relation to college drinking



Brian H. Calhoun<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer L. Maggs<sup>a</sup>, Eric Loken<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The Pennsylvania State University, 119 Health & Human Development Building, University Park, PA 16802, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Connecticut, 328 Gentry Building, Storrs, CT 06269, United States

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use increased from the last year of high school through third year of college.
- Differences in mean permissibility were positively associated with binge drinking frequency and peak drinking in college.
- Four patterns of stability and change in perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use were identified across college.
- Patterns of permissibility change differentially predicted binge drinking frequency and peak drinking across college.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use  
College drinking  
Transition to adulthood

## ABSTRACT

College students who perceive their parents to hold permissive views about their alcohol use engage in heavier drinking. However, few studies have assessed perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use (PPP) longitudinally across the later college years, and few have assessed variation in changes in PPP and whether or not these changes differentially predict drinking. This study assessed whether PPP changed across college and used two approaches to determine whether PPP predicted binge drinking frequency and peak drinking. Data on college students' daily lives and risk behaviors were collected from 687 students (51% female) in a large university in the Northeast United States over four years. Perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use increased from the last year of high school through the third year of college with males reporting significantly higher PPP by the third year of college. From 12th grade through the third year of college, between-person differences in mean PPP were positively associated with binge drinking frequency and peak drinking, and patterns of PPP change differentially predicted both drinking outcomes through fourth year. These findings suggest that PPP is a dynamic construct that may evidence important developmental changes across college and the transition to adulthood. More broadly, the results indicate that aspects of the parent-child relationship continue to change after high school and may be important as they are linked with college student risk behaviors.

## 1. Introduction

Research suggests that parents continue to influence late adolescent alcohol use during the college years (Turrisi, Wiersma, & Hughes, 2000; Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004). For example, many parenting behaviors including parent-teen communication, parental modeling of alcohol use, and parental monitoring are associated with college drinking (Abar, Abar, & Turrisi, 2009; Small, Morgan, Abar, & Maggs, 2011; Turrisi & Ray, 2010). Perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use (PPP), that is, students' perceptions of whether and how much their parents think it is acceptable for them to drink, is associated with college students' drinking quantity, binge drinking likelihood, and

negative alcohol consequences (Abar et al., 2009; Varvil-Weld, Crowley, Turrisi, Greenberg, & Mallett, 2014; Walls, Fairlie, & Wood, 2009). This study aims to extend previous research linking PPP and college drinking by assessing whether (and when) parents become more permissive about college student drinking and whether PPP is linked with drinking across multiple years of college.

### 1.1. The transition to adulthood

Over the last half-century, changing socioeconomic conditions have led to a new phase of development between the end of secondary school (~ 18 years of age) and the mid- to late-twenties, often referred to as the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [bhc120@psu.edu](mailto:bhc120@psu.edu) (B.H. Calhoun), [jmaggs@psu.edu](mailto:jmaggs@psu.edu) (J.L. Maggs), [eric.loken@uconn.edu](mailto:eric.loken@uconn.edu) (E. Loken).

transition to adulthood. This period is characterized by historic increases in instability, individualization, identity exploration, and heterogeneity (Arnett, 2007; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Settersten & Ray, 2010). During these years, many risk behaviors, including substance use, typically peak (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2016; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2003).

As the transition to adulthood continues to become longer and more complex, the role of parents during these years, especially the college years, may be increasing in importance. For example, college students often seek help and emotional support from parents, and overall, value their support and assistance (Chen & Kat, 2009; Kenny, 1987; Trice, 2002). Further, aspects of the parent-child relationship during college predict students' risk behaviors including alcohol use. For example, greater parent-student communication is associated with lower student drinking during college (Small et al., 2011; Turrisi et al., 2000).

### 1.2. Perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use and college drinking

Studies of early to mid-adolescents have consistently linked PPP to earlier initiation of alcohol use and greater drinking (Hyatt & Collins, 2000; Tucker, Ellickson, & Klein, 2008; van der Vorst, Vermulst, Meeus, Deković, & Engels, 2009). Prior work has also linked PPP in the last year of high school with greater drinking behaviors in college, including drinking quantity, binge drinking, and peak drinking (Fairlie, Wood, & Laird, 2012; Varvil-Weld et al., 2014; Walls et al., 2009). Furthermore, cross-sectional analyses of second-year college students in the present sample concluded that those whose parents took a zero-tolerance approach to underage college drinking drank less than those whose parents were more accepting of alcohol use (Abar, Morgan, Small, & Maggs, 2012). Although a number of studies have linked PPP with drinking prior to and during college, there are still two primary gaps in this literature.

First, as most studies have measured PPP only on a single occasion, there is a lack of longitudinal research documenting whether and how this construct changes across college. Further, if PPP does change during college, there is likely heterogeneity in patterns of PPP change, and these different patterns may, in turn, be differentially associated with levels of drinking. For example, some parents condone their children's drinking during late adolescence (Foley, Altman, & Wolfson, 2004), while other parents approve of alcohol use only after their children meet the minimum legal drinking age (Yu, 1998). For both groups, parents' attitudes towards alcohol are linked with their children's drinking. Based on this prior research and research concerning late adolescent independence, autonomy, and substance use (Barber, Maughan, & Olsen, 2005; Cheng, Cantave, & Anthony, 2016; Greenberger, 1984; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), we speculated there may be several different patterns of PPP change among parents, including patterns of consistently low and consistently high PPP as well as a pattern of increasing PPP as students neared the minimum legal drinking age of 21 years old.

Second, few studies have examined whether PPP and college drinking are linked in the later college years, focusing primarily on PPP in the last year of high school as a predictor of early college drinking. Although some parent behaviors and characteristics, including PPP, parental modeling of alcohol use, and parental monitoring, predict alcohol use in high school and across the transition to college (Abar et al., 2009; Small et al., 2011; Turrisi & Ray, 2010), it is unclear whether parents continue to influence their children's drinking behaviors in the later college years as they near and pass the minimum legal drinking age and become more independent generally.

### 1.3. Present study

The present study focused on changes in perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use (PPP) across college and tested whether this construct—both continuously across the full sample and contrasting

longitudinal clusters representing different patterns of PPP change—predicted binge drinking frequency and peak drinking. We hypothesized that (1) college students' PPP would increase on average from the last year of high school through the third year of college; (2) mean levels of PPP would predict levels of binge drinking frequency and peak drinking across four years of college; and (3) membership in PPP clusters would be differentially associated with levels of the two drinking outcomes across college.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants

Data came from the University Life Study (ULS), a longitudinal study assessing the daily lives and risk behaviors of college students in a Northeast US state university (Howard, Patrick, & Maggs, 2014). The ULS used a longitudinal measurement-burst design in which participants completed a longer, web-based survey followed by 14 consecutive daily web-based surveys in each of seven semesters. In the first wave, eligible participants were first-year, first-time, full-time students who were under 21 years of age, were US citizens or permanent residents, and lived within 25 miles of the main campus. Participants were recruited using a stratified, random sampling procedure aiming to recruit similar numbers of females and males in each of the four largest US racial/ethnic groups.

Data collected in the first through seventh semesters were used in the present analyses. The mean age of participants ( $N = 744$ ) in fall of first year was 18.45 years ( $SD = 0.43$  years); 50.8% were female. The sample was racially and ethnically diverse: 25.1% were Hispanic or Latino American; European American Non-Hispanic or Latino (NHL), 27.4%; Asian American NHL, 23.3%; African American NHL, 15.7%; and multiracial NHL, 8.5%. Due to the sampling strategy, the sample was more ethnically diverse than the student body.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Perceived parental permissibility of alcohol use (PPP)

In spring of second year, students indicated the amount of alcohol they perceived their parents would deem as an upper limit for them to consume (Varvil-Weld et al., 2014). Single items referred to three time periods: The current year, the first year of college, and the last year of high school, for example, “During your sophomore (second) year of college, how many drinks would your parents consider the maximum number for you to consume on any given occasion?” In spring of third year, this question was repeated regarding the current year. Possible responses were “no amount would be ok” (0), “1 drink” (1), “2 drinks” (2), “3 drinks” (3), “4 drinks” (4), “5 drinks” (5), “6–12 drinks” (6), and “there was no upper limit” (7).

#### 2.2.2. Alcohol use

Alcohol use was assessed annually during fall of students' first four years of college. One drink was defined as one 12-ounce can or bottle of beer, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or one drink containing one shot of liquor (International Center for Alcohol Policies, 1998). 30-day binge drinking frequency was measured by asking “During the last 30 days (one month), how often did you have 4/5 [females/males] or more drinks containing any kind of alcohol within a two-hour period?” (NIAAA, 2004). Possible responses were “I never had 4/5 or more drinks within a two-hour period in the last 30 days” (0), “Once” (1), “2 to 3 times” (2), “Once a week” (3), “Two times a week” (4), “3 to 4 times a week” (5), “5 to 6 times a week” (6), and “Everyday” (7). 30-day peak drinking was measured by asking “During the last 30 days (one month), what is the maximum number of drinks containing alcohol that you drank within a 24-hour period?” (NIAAA, 2004), with a maximum set at 25 drinks.

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