



Descriptive drinking norms in Native American and non-Hispanic White college students



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ABSTRACT

Objective: College students tend to overestimate how much their peers drink, which is associated with higher personal alcohol use. However, research has not yet examined if this phenomenon holds true among Native American (NA) college students. This study examined associations between descriptive norms and alcohol use/consequences in a sample of NA and non-Hispanic White (NHW) college students.

Method: NA ($n = 147$, 78.6% female) and NHW ($n = 246$, 67.8% female) undergraduates completed an online survey.

Results: NAs NHWs showed similar descriptive norms such that the “typical college student,” “typical NA student,” and “typical NHW student” were perceived to drink more than “best friends.” “Best friends” descriptive norms (i.e., estimations of how many drinks per week were consumed by participants’ best friends) were the most robust predictors of alcohol use/consequences. Effect size estimates of the associations between drinking norms and participants’ alcohol use were consistently positive and ranged from $r = 0.25$ to $r = 0.51$ across the four reference groups. Negative binomial hurdle models revealed that all descriptive norms tended to predict drinking, and “best friends” drinking norms predicted alcohol consequences. Apart from one interaction effect, likely due to familywise error rate, these associations were not qualified by interactions with racial/ethnic group.

Conclusions: We found similar patterns between NAs and NHWs both in the pattern of descriptive norms across reference groups and in the strength of associations between descriptive norms and alcohol use/consequences. Although these results suggest that descriptive norms operate similarly among NAs as other college students, additional research is needed to identify whether other norms (e.g., injunctive norms) operate similarly across NA and NHW students.

1. Introduction

1.1. Native American and non-Hispanic White college attendance

Native Americans (NAs) represent approximately 150,000 of the 20 million currently enrolled college students in the United States, as compared to 11 million non-Hispanic Whites (NHWs). NAs evidence disparity in four-year graduation rates; for a 2008 cohort, the graduation rate for NAs was only 23%, compared to 43.7% for NHWs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This finding highlights the importance of research on factors affecting NA college retention, yet empirical study is lacking. Due to low representation in research, NAs are frequently either excluded from analyses or aggregated into a heterogeneous “other” racial/ethnic category (e.g., Johnston et al., 2015).

1.2. College student alcohol use and perceived drinking norms

Drinking is one factor that may impact college retention rates. Although little is known about NA college student alcohol use, drinking consequences have been extensively researched among college students more generally. Acute alcohol intoxication in college samples has been associated with dangerous behaviors such as impaired driving, risky sexual behavior, increased aggression, and blackouts (e.g., Chou et al., 2006; Lewis, Rees, Logan, Kaysen, & Kilmer, 2010; Perkins, 2002).

Social norm theorists assert that social reference groups exert a significant influence on the formation of an individual's beliefs and behavior patterns (e.g., Festinger, 1954). Applied to college drinking, social norms theory posits that students' beliefs about how much their peers are drinking (i.e., drinking norms) influence students' own alcohol consumption such that students who believe that their peers who drink

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heavily will drink more in order to “fit in” with the status quo. Descriptive drinking norms refer to college students' estimations of how much members of their peer group drink, and are the most commonly studied type of drinking norm in college samples.

College students have been shown to systematically overestimate the amount that members of their peer groups drink (e.g., Borsari & Carey, 2003; Perkins et al., 1999). Furthermore, students who perceive that their peers drink heavily (i.e. high descriptive drinking norms) have been shown to drink more (Clapp & McDonnell, 2000; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). One limitation of the extant literature is that drinking norms research has focused mainly on NHWs. To date, no study has examined drinking norms among NA college students.

1.3. NA college student alcohol use and NA drinking norms

NA youth report first consuming alcohol at a younger age than all other racial/ethnic groups in the United States and experience a higher incidence of drinking-related consequences when they drink (Chen et al., 2004). However, preliminary evidence suggests that college-attending NAs evidence similar drinking patterns to their NHW counterparts. Using data from a national survey of college students, Ward and Ridolfo (2011) found that approximately 65% of NA students consumed alcohol in the past 30 days, and 41% met Welscher et al.'s (1995) criteria for binge drinking (i.e., 4/5 or more drinks on one occasion for women/men). Although NA students exhibit similar high rates of alcohol consumption and binge drinking as the general college population, it is not clear whether these drinking behaviors are predicted by the same factors among NAs.

Although no published research has directly examined drinking norms among adult NAs, one qualitative study examining beliefs about drinking in a reservation-based NA sample found that most participants disapproved of alcohol use. Furthermore, participants believed that NAs were incapable of moderate, social levels of drinking (Yuan et al., 2010). A recent analysis of national data found that NAs were more likely than NHWs to report past-month abstinence from alcohol use (59.9% vs. 43.1%, respectively; Cunningham, Solomon, & Muramoto, 2016). High rates of abstinence among NAs and proscriptions against alcohol use in reservation communities contrast the conception for heavy drinking as a “rite of passage” for U.S. college students (Crawford & Novak, 2006). Examination of how drinking norms function in urban NA college students, who may have grown up in communities with social disapproval for heavy drinking, will serve to elucidate the relationship between drinking norms and NA college alcohol use.

1.4. College student drinking norms and reference group proximity

Extensive research in general college student samples has identified several moderators of the magnitude of the drinking norms-alcohol use relationship. One such moderator is proximity of the normative reference group (i.e., the closeness of the reference group to an individual student). The most distal reference group is “the university typical student”, with race, gender, age, and ethnicity unspecified. More proximal reference groups include members of a team or fraternity, with the most proximal reference groups consisting of a student's best friends. Cox and Bates (2011) found that while students' normative beliefs about their best friends drinking were significantly positively associated with their own drinking, students' normative beliefs about the average student's drinking were not associated; this finding has been consistently corroborated in other studies (e.g. Cho, 2006). Given that most drinking norms research has been conducted with NHWs, it is not clear how proximity of the normative reference group may function for NAs.

1.5. Purpose of the present study

The present study sought to address three gaps in the research literature concerning drinking norms and alcohol in NA and NHW college students. First, we compared NA and NHW college students in terms of their quantity of alcohol use and alcohol-related problems. Second, we compared NA and NHW college students in terms of their perceived drinking norms (i.e., descriptive norms) for four reference groups: the “typical college student,” “the typical NA college student,” “the typical NHW college student,” and “best friends.” Finally, we compared the predictive validity of descriptive norms in predicting alcohol-related outcomes between NA and NHW college students.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

During recruitment, 12,439 NHWs and 2096 NAs were enrolled as undergraduates at the large Southwestern University where the research was conducted. Five hundred NHWs and 1311 NAs were invited to participate in the study via email addresses obtained from the university's registrar. In addition, students enrolled in psychology classes had the option to participate through the psychology department's research website. The study was advertised in the student newspaper and in a local, free weekly newspaper. A total of 588 individuals consented to begin the online survey and 472 individuals completed it. Seventy participants identifying as other than NA or NHW, eight older than 30, and one who did not answer most survey items were removed prior to analysis. The age range of 18–30 was selected to assess more specifically the experiences of “traditional” college students, as it was hypothesized that older students might be more likely to have environmental factors impacting their drinking, such as caring for children. The resulting sample size was 393 (147 NAs and 246 NHWs). A self-report question included in the survey provided data on how participants accessed the survey. Only 24.5% of NAs ($n = 36$) accessed the survey through the psychology research website compared to 72% of NHWs ($n = 177$). Approximately 73% of NAs ($n = 107$) reported hearing about the survey via email invitation, as compared to 21% of NHWs ($n = 52$).

2.2. Participants

Comparisons between NAs and NHWs on demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The groups did not significantly differ with respect to age and residence location. Approximately 67% of NAs reported having ever lived on a NA reservation. The groups significantly differed with respect to gender, year in school, and first language learned. A higher percentage of NAs identified as female (77.6% vs. 67.5% for NHW). A higher percentage of NHWs were freshmen (39%), whereas NAs were evenly distributed between the four college years. Finally, a higher percentage of NHWs indicated that English was the first language they had learned (97.6% vs. 80.3% for NAs).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Alcohol use

Alcohol use in the past seven days was assessed via a modified (i.e., number of hours spent drinking per day was not queried) version of the Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985). Using a one-week grid, individuals reported the standard number of drinks consumed on each day of a typical drinking week. These responses were summed to obtain a total number of drinks consumed during a typical drinking week (i.e., drinks per week, DPW).

2.3.2. Descriptive norms

Descriptive drinking norms were assessed with a modified (i.e.,

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