



The role of perceived injunctive alcohol norms in adolescent drinking behavior☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Little work has examined perceived injunctive norms among high school youth.
- Injunctive norms associated with all five alcohol outcomes.
- Perceived descriptive norms associated with four of the five alcohol outcomes.
- Including injunctive norms in youth prevention programs may be important.

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ABSTRACT

Peers have a major influence on youth during adolescence, and perceptions about peer alcohol use (perceived norms) are often associated with personal drinking behavior among youth. Most of the research on perceived norms among adolescents focuses on perceived *descriptive* norms only, or perceptions about peers' behavior, and correcting these perceptions are a major focus of many prevention programs with adolescents. In contrast, perceived *injunctive* norms, which are personal perceptions about peers' attitudes regarding the acceptability of behaviors, have been minimally examined in the adolescent drinking literature. Yet correcting perceptions about these perceived peer attitudes may be an important component to include in prevention programs with youth. Using a sample of 2493 high school-aged youth (mean age = 17.3), we assessed drinking behavior (past year use; past month frequency, quantity, and peak drinks), drinking consequences, and perceived descriptive and injunctive norms to examine the relationships of perceived injunctive and descriptive norms on adolescent drinking behavior. Findings indicated that although perceived descriptive norms were associated with some drinking outcomes (past year use; past month frequency; past month quantity; peak drinks), perceived injunctive norms were associated with all drinking outcomes, including outcomes of consequences, even after controlling for perceived descriptive norms. Findings suggest that consideration of perceived injunctive norms may be important in models of adolescent drinking. Prevention programs that do not include injunctive norms feedback may miss an important opportunity to enhance effectiveness of such prevention programs targeting adolescent alcohol use.

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1. Introduction

Perhaps more than any other developmental period, adolescence is strongly influenced by social norms, which are observed or unspoken behaviors and attitudes that are perceived as prevalent and acceptable within a group or population (Simons-Morton & Farhat, 2010;

Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). Perceived norms have been categorized as perceived descriptive norms, or perceptions about what others do (behaviors), and perceived injunctive norms, or perceptions about what other approve and disapprove of (attitudes) (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Elek, Miller-Day, & Hecht, 2006; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). These are distinct aspects of a common perceived norms entity (Rimal & Real, 2003) and both have an influence on one's own behaviors and attitudes, including use of alcohol and engagement in other risky behaviors (Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002). Perceived descriptive norms (also referenced as "perceived behavioral norms" in the literature) have emerged as one of the most important predictors of drinking among young people (D'Amico & McCarthy, 2006; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007) and several studies have shown that

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perceived descriptive norms in adolescence, in particular, predict drinking onset, current drinking behavior, drinking escalation over time, and greater intentions to drink in the next six months (D'Amico & McCarthy, 2006; Olds, Thombs, & Tomasek, 2005; Page, Hammermeister, & Roland, 2002; Reboussin, Song, Shrestha, Lohman, & Wolfson, 2006; Song, Smiler, Wagoner, & Wolfson, 2012). Targeting the discrepancies between youth perceptions and actual drinking of peers is a common component of interventions with adolescents (Cuijpers, 2002; Komro & Toomey, 2002; Spoth, Greenberg, & Turrissi, 2008), where youth receive accurate information about the drinking of their peers to correct their overestimations (Caria, Faggiano, Bellocco, & Galanti, 2011; D'Amico et al., 2012; Haines, Barker, & Rice, 2003; Hansen & Graham, 1991).

2. Perceived injunctive norms

Prevention programs have solely targeted perceived descriptive norms during presentation of normative feedback, yet there is some evidence that perceived *injunctive* norms (also referenced as “perceived attitudinal norms” in the literature) may also be important to target given that they also play a unique role in predicting adolescent drinking (Elek et al., 2006; Kam, Matsunaga, Hecht, & Ndiaye, 2009). However, despite a surplus of studies describing perceived descriptive norms in models of drinking and consequences, only a few studies target perceived injunctive norms, which makes more research on this particular type of perceived norm important for informing future prevention programs with youth. The studies that do discuss perceived injunctive norms are primarily with college student samples, which have shown an important distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms (e.g., Lee, Geisner, Lewis, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2007). For example, perceived injunctive norms for heavy drinking students, such as those in fraternities and sororities, were stronger predictors of drinking and consequences compared to descriptive norms at one year follow-up (Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004). Perceived injunctive norms have also been shown to moderate the relationship between perceived descriptive norms and behavioral intention (Rimal & Real, 2003) and predict subsequent alcohol-related consequences even after controlling for actual alcohol consumption (LaBrie, Hummer, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2010).

Evaluating whether perceived injunctive norms are similarly important for high school age youth can help inform future efforts to tailor normative interventions for this population. The few studies with adolescents that include perceived injunctive norms are with younger adolescent samples (i.e., middle school youth). These studies typically find that permissive perceived injunctive norms about peers (e.g., believing your close friends would approve of *you* drinking alcohol occasionally; believing most friends approve of kids your age drinking alcohol or getting drunk) positively associate with concurrent and future drinking (Jackson et al., 2014; Kam, Basinger, & Abendschein, 2015; Kam & Wang, 2015; Kam et al., 2009; Meisel, Colder, & Hawk, 2015; Mrug & McCay, 2013). Perceived *parent* injunctive norms, such as beliefs that parents would disapprove of drinking, have strong preventive effects on problem drinking (Elek et al., 2006; Reboussin et al., 2006; Song et al., 2012; Voisine, Parsai, Marsiglia, Kulis, & Nieri, 2008), as do personal anti-drinking attitudes (i.e., disagreeing that it is okay for someone your age to drink alcohol) (Elek et al., 2006; Prins, Donovan, & Molina, 2011; Voisine et al., 2008). Many of the studies of perceived injunctive norms that do expand into high school aged youth samples either combine substances in perceived peer injunctive norm measures (e.g., perceptions about alcohol and other drug use like cigarette use and marijuana among peers) or limit outcomes to frequency and intention to use in the future. As recent research demonstrates that the influence of perceived injunctive norms on alcohol use increases with grade level for middle school youth (Meisel & Colder, 2015) and given the diversity of prevalence among the specific substance of use in adolescence (Johnston, O'Malley, Miech, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2015), a closer examination

of perceived injunctive norms in high school becomes increasingly important as many youth begin initiating use during this time.

3. The present study

The present study was designed to address gaps in the literature on perceived peer influence on adolescent drinking behavior to better inform programmatic efforts targeted toward reducing and preventing adolescent alcohol use. First, by targeting a large and diverse high school aged sample, we expand on prior work on perceived injunctive norms that has primarily targeted college students or middle school youth. Second, we designed the analyses to specifically examine the associations between perceived injunctive norms and drinking behaviors after controlling for perceived descriptive norms. In doing so, we can provide insights about the role injunctive norms play in drinking outcomes beyond the typical strong association between perceived descriptive norms and drinking. We expand on studies that look at single outcomes of alcohol use to examine how perceived norms are related to multiple drinking outcomes (i.e., any use, frequency, quantity, peak drinks on a single occasion, and consequences). Lastly, we expand on perceived peer injunctive norms research with adolescents, which generally looks at close friends' disapproval of any drinking, by examining perceived peer *acceptability* of seven specific behaviors (playing drinking games, getting drunk, drinking every weekend, drinking under age 21, driving a car after drinking, drinking alone, and never drinking) to determine which perceptions are most strongly related to personal drinking. These analyses are anticipated to greatly enhance understanding of perceived injunctive norms within the high school adolescent population and provide guidance regarding whether interventions might benefit from including injunctive norms presentation in the effort to prevent adolescent alcohol use.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and procedure

Data for the present study come from a longitudinal study of youth who participated in the evaluation of CHOICE, a voluntary after-school substance use prevention program for middle school students in Southern California. Youth were initially recruited from 16 middle schools, and surveyed annually from 6th grade through high school (D'Amico et al., 2016). Details about the recruitment methods and CHOICE program are described in detail elsewhere (D'Amico et al., 2012, 2016). In brief, schools were randomly assigned to offer CHOICE and 94% of consented students completed a baseline survey (wave 1) in their middle school classroom. Participants in the study were more heavily Hispanic/Latino(a) than participants in other large scale studies of youth, such as Monitoring the Future (MTF) or the National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). Given the location of the study, however, demographics are generalizable to these Southern California schools. Rates of use over time by age group are comparable to MTF and NSDUH. Response rates over the course of the study are also described in detail elsewhere (D'Amico et al., 2016). In brief, response rates from the first five waves of the study when youth were in middle school ranged from 74% to 90%. During this time, youth completed surveys during PE class. Once students transitioned to over 200 high schools during wave 6, 61% of the youth eligible to receive the wave 6 survey (i.e., they were in 6th–7th grade at wave 1 and could be located and re-consented) completed it. Youth who completed the wave 6 survey did not differ on demographics or on substance use compared to those who did not complete the survey. Retention from wave 6 to wave 7 was 80%. Both wave 6 and 7 surveys were completed online.

The current analyses use data from wave 7, which is the first survey to include items on perceived injunctive norms. Participants in this wave were mostly in 11th and 12th grade. The analytic sample included 2493 youth with a mean age of 17.3 (SD = 0.67). About half (46%) were

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