



Positive heavy drinking attitude mediates the association between college alcohol beliefs and alcohol-related outcomes



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HIGHLIGHTS

- College alcohol beliefs are positively associated with attitudes toward heavy drinking.
- Attitude toward heavy drinking mediates the college alcohol belief – alcohol use association.
- Attitude toward heavy drinking mediates the college alcohol belief – alcohol problem association.

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ABSTRACT

College alcohol beliefs and personal attitudes about alcohol use are important predictors of alcohol use and related problems both cross-sectionally and over time. However, little work has examined these constructs together and how they may influence one another in predicting various alcohol related outcomes over time. The current study aimed to evaluate one's attitude toward heavy drinking as a mediator of the association between college alcohol beliefs and drinking related outcomes over a 12-month period of time. Participants were mandated students ($n = 568$; 28% female) who violated campus alcohol policy and received a Brief Motivational Intervention. Analyses included the use of linear regression for prospective predictions as well as PROCESS to evaluate the proposed mediation models. Overall, the results indicate that one's attitude toward heavy drinking significantly mediates the association between college alcohol beliefs and drinks per week, binge frequency, as well as alcohol-related problems over 12 months. These findings provide a compelling rationale for incorporating both college alcohol beliefs and attitudes in the development and refinement of intervention strategies.

1. Introduction

College is a time when late adolescents explore their relationship with alcohol and other drugs, and campuses deal with the effects of this youthful exploration. Although more than half of students attending college are under the minimum legal drinking age of 21 (American College Health Association, 2012), 81% report lifetime alcohol use (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2015). Over 1/3 of college students report heavy episodic drinking (4+ /5+ drinks in a single sitting for females/males) at least once in the past 2 weeks, and as many as 40% report getting drunk in the past 30 days (Johnston et al., 2015). Indeed, the college environment appears to promote a style of drinking involving high quantities per occasion, and college attendance increases risk for heavy drinking for both underage and of-legal-age

young adults (Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009). College student drinkers report a range of adverse effects such as blackouts, academic underperformance, and interpersonal problems (Johnston et al., 2015).

1.1. College alcohol beliefs

A number of social cognitive factors (e.g., social norms, drinking motives, and alcohol expectancies) predict alcohol use and related problems (Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Recent research has identified an additional cognitive construct that appears to have a robust relationship with alcohol use and related problems: college alcohol beliefs, or the extent to which one identifies drinking as a central part of the college experience (Osberg et al., 2010). The college alcohol beliefs construct

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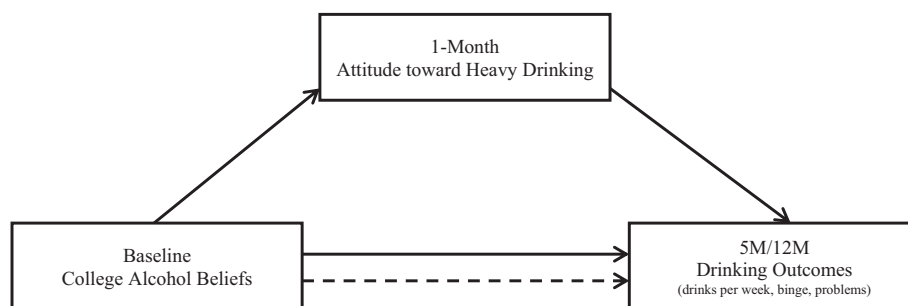


Fig. 1. Conceptual Figure of Primary Mediation Models.

mediates and moderates the predictive effects of personality variables on alcohol use and related problems (LaBrie, Kenney, Napper, & Miller, 2014; Pearson & Hustad, 2014), has a direct positive effect on alcohol-related problems (Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg, Insana, Eggert, & Billingsley, 2011; Qi, Pearson & Hustad, 2014), is negatively associated with motivation to change (Qi, Pearson, & Hustad, 2014), is associated with lower use of protective behavioral strategies (Bravo, Prince, & Pearson, 2017), and increases risk of regretted sexual encounters (Osberg & Boyer, 2016). Finally, college alcohol beliefs demonstrate incremental predictive validity above and beyond established cognitive predictors such as drinking motives, social norms, and positive and negative expectancies (Osberg et al., 2010, 2011).

Although research linking college alcohol beliefs to heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems is compelling, it is unclear how college alcohol beliefs are related to – and potentially influence – other social cognitive constructs. For example, one could argue that normative perceptions (perceptions about how typical a behavior is) likely influence some aspects of college alcohol beliefs (e.g., “Blacking out is to be expected in college”). However, college alcohol beliefs are a prospective predictor of alcohol use and problems among college students when controlling for drinking norms (Osberg et al., 2011); thus, the construct of college alcohol beliefs has been shown to be distinct from social norms. Alternatively, and untested to date, the belief that alcohol is central to college life may reflect a general attitude toward alcohol use, which in turn, may render alcohol use and related problems more permissible.

1.2. Attitudes

Broadly defined, attitudes are evaluative judgments that range from negative to positive and are influenced by situational factors, including observations of one's own behavior. Attitudes represent a key explanatory variable in many theories of health behavior (Bem, 1967; Glasman & Albarracín, 2006; Higgins, 1987; Montano & Kasprzyk, 2008). Specific to alcohol use, research suggests that positive attitudes toward heavy drinking are stronger predictors of alcohol use, binge drinking, and alcohol-related problems than other cognitive correlates of heavy drinking, including descriptive and injunctive norms (DiBello, Miller, Young, Neighbors, & Lindgren, 2018). Emergent work also suggests that theory-driven attitude change paradigms offer novel yet important opportunities to reduce positive attitudes resulting in lower drinking intentions and alcohol consumption (DiBello et al., 2018). However, research to date has not examined the associations between college alcohol beliefs and attitudes toward alcohol use.

Theoretically, if young adults internalize drinking as a central part of the college experience, this might influence their attitudes toward heavy drinking during college. That is, individuals who believe alcohol is central to the college experience may be more likely to seek out people who share those beliefs and environments that support heavy drinking. This type of exposure may contribute to positive feelings toward heavy drinking, which in turn, may lead to greater alcohol use, binge frequency, and related problems. The temporal precedence of

these variables is important, as prevention and intervention efforts are encouraged to target the most proximal mediator of behavioral outcomes (Kuntsche, Wiers, Janssen, & Gmel, 2010). In this case, if attitudes mediate association between college alcohol beliefs and heavy drinking, then interventions specifically targeting personal attitudes toward heavy drinking may be warranted.

1.3. Current study

The current paper aimed to extend previous work linking college alcohol beliefs to other social cognitive predictors of alcohol use behavior. With research suggesting that both college alcohol beliefs (Bravo et al., 2017; Osberg & Boyer, 2016; Pearson & Hustad, 2014; Qi et al., 2014) and attitudes (e.g., DiBello et al., 2018) are strong predictors of alcohol use, more nuanced understanding of the associations between these constructs will inform future research and interventions targets. Consistent with previous research (Osberg et al., 2011), we hypothesized that college alcohol beliefs at baseline would be associated with drinking quantity, binge frequency, and alcohol-related problems at 5 and 12 months. Moreover, we hypothesized that the association between college alcohol beliefs and drinking behavior would be mediated by one's attitude toward heavy alcohol use at 1 month (see Fig. 1).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Undergraduate students from a large public university in the Northeast U.S. were recruited to participate in a larger research project evaluating outcomes of intervention for students mandated for campus alcohol violations (Carey et al., 2018, in press). The final sample consisted of 568 students (72% male, 84% White) with a mean age of 19.18 years ($SD = 1.16$). They had the option of either participating in the research study (in which all received a brief alcohol intervention) or participating in the standard sanction. The research sample represents 94% of the students sanctioned for alcohol violations (Merrill, Carey, Lust, Kalichman, & Carey, 2014). All students who consented to participate in the larger study were included in current analyses. Data for this study were collected at baseline, one, five, and 12-month assessments. All participants received a single brief alcohol intervention between baseline and the one-month assessment, resulting in reductions in alcohol use and consequences (Carey et al., 2018, in press). Right after the one-month follow-up, participants received a series of 12 email boosters, containing either corrective alcohol norms or general health information, based on random assignment. The RCT portion of the study did not result in differential group differences on outcomes (Carey et al., 2018, in press). The baseline and one-month assessments consisted of online surveys completed in a private suite and facilitated by a research assistant. All other assessments were completed remotely. All study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

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