



Do drinking motives distinguish extreme drinking college students from their peers?



Helene R. White^{a,*}, Kristen G. Anderson^b, Anne E. Ray^c, Eun-Young Mun^a

^a Center of Alcohol Studies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 607 Allison Road, Piscataway, NJ 08854-8001, USA

^b Department of Psychology, Reed College, 3203 SE Woodstock Blvd., Portland, OR 97202, USA

^c REAL Prevention, LLC, 765 Long Hill Road, Gillette, NJ 07933, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- College extreme drinkers report highest social, enhancement, and coping motives.
- Students who become extreme drinkers increase their social and enhancement motives.
- Students who stop extreme drinking decrease their enhancement and coping motives.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The literature highlights the need to move beyond the traditional heavy episodic (“binge”) drinking criteria when trying to identify at-risk college drinkers. Thus, recent attention has focused on more extreme levels of drinking. This study examines whether drinking motives can distinguish college student extreme drinkers from lighter drinkers.

Method: We used data from 3518 college student current drinkers (63.4% women) who participated in eight different studies at five different college campuses across the United States; a subsample of these students was followed up at 6 months post-baseline. At baseline and follow-up, drinkers were divided into three groups: nonbinge drinkers (<4 drinks for women and 5 for men on their maximum drinking occasion), binge drinkers (4–7 drinks for women; 5–9 for men), and extreme drinkers (8+ for women and 10+ for men).

Results: At baseline, extreme drinkers, compared to nonbinge and binge drinkers, reported greater social, enhancement, and coping motives, as well as greater quantity and frequency of drinking per week and more alcohol-related problems. Those who were not extreme drinkers at baseline and later became extreme drinkers at follow-up reported significantly greater increases in social and enhancement motives, compared to those who remained nonextreme drinkers. Those who were extreme drinkers at baseline and reduced their drinking 6 months later, compared to those who remained extreme drinkers, reported greater reductions in enhancement and coping motives.

Conclusions: Focusing on drinking motives might be an efficacious target for preventive intervention programs to reduce extreme drinking among college students.

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1. Introduction

Heavy episodic drinking (HED), commonly referred to as “binge drinking,” garnishes a lot of attention on college campuses. Binge drinking increases risk for numerous problems, including academic failure, accidents, risky sexual behavior, and violence (Wechsler,

Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994; White & Rabiner, 2012) and can have long-term negative effects on cognitive functioning and health (Arria, Garnier-Dykstra, Caldeira, Vincent, Winick, & O’Grady, 2013; Lisdahl & Tapert, 2012). Whereas definitions of binge drinking have varied greatly across studies in terms of amounts consumed (for reviews see Courtney & Polich, 2009; Oei & Morawska, 2004), the most common definition is either 5+ drinks in a row for both men and women (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014) or 5+ drinks for men and 4+ for women in a row (Wechsler et al., 2002). Using the former definition, it has been estimated that 35% of U.S. college students (43% of men and 30% of women) meet the criteria for binge drinking over a 2-week period

* Corresponding author at: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies, 607 Allison Road, Piscataway, NJ 08854-8001, USA.

E-mail addresses: hewwhite@rci.rutgers.edu (H.R. White), Kristen.Anderson@reed.edu (K.G. Anderson), anneray@real-prevention.com (A.E. Ray), eymun@rci.rutgers.edu (E.-Y. Mun).

(Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014), which is somewhat lower than what had been reported from a national survey of college students using the latter gender-specific definition (44% total; 49% of men and 41% of women; Wechsler et al., 2002).

Several researchers have proposed that the traditional 5+ /4+ binge drinking criteria are too low to identify student problem drinkers (Beirness, Foss, & Vogel-Sprott, 2004; Fillmore & Jude, 2011; Mundt, Zakletskaia, & Fleming, 2009; Read, Beattie, Chamberlain, & Merrill, 2008; White, Kraus, & Swartzwelder, 2006). Patrick, Schulenberg, Martz, Maggs, O'Malley, & Johnston (2013) suggest that reliance on traditional binge drinking criteria obscures meaningful variation in how much youth drink and may miss important distinctions between levels of drinking and consequences experienced (see also Turner, Bauerle, & Shu, 2004). In fact, several studies have shown that youth drink much more beyond the traditional binge drinking threshold (Patrick et al., 2013; Read et al., 2008; White et al., 2006), which highlights the need to move beyond traditional binge drinking criteria to identify at-risk drinkers. Thus, attention has recently moved to more extreme levels of drinking (e.g., double the traditional criteria for binge drinking; Patrick et al., 2013).

To date, there is a lack of information about what motivates extreme drinking. Drinking motives, that is, reasons individuals endorse for drinking alcohol, are considered proximal predictors of alcohol consumption (Cox & Klinger, 1988) and are robustly associated with alcohol-related decision making from adolescence through emerging adulthood (Cooper, Kuntsche, Levitt, Barber, Wolf, & Sher, 2015; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005). Cooper's (1994) framework of drinking motives has been the most frequently studied. In this framework, social motives involve reasons to drink associated with social facilitation; enhancement motives capture reasons associated with fun and pleasure; coping motives indicate drinking to reduce negative affect; and conformity motives relate to drinking to fit-in with peers.

Overall, most individuals endorse social and enhancement motives with fewer indicating coping and conformity motives (Cooper et al., 2015; Crutzen, Kuntsche, & Schelleman-Offermans, 2013; Kuntsche et al., 2005). In general, endorsing greater social motives relates to increasing levels of alcohol consumption, and in some investigations, greater alcohol-related problems (e.g., Van Damme, Maes, Clays, Rosiers, Van Hal, & Hublet, 2013); higher enhancement motives predict risky drinking and related problems, while higher coping motives predict later alcohol-related problems (Cooper et al., 2015; Kuntsche et al., 2005; Schelleman-Offermans, Kuntsche, & Knibbe, 2011). Findings for conformity motives are mixed; some studies suggest increased conformity leads to greater drinking and problems (e.g., Merrill & Read, 2010), while others suggest an opposite relationship or no relation at all (Crutzen et al., 2013; Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010; Kuntsche et al., 2005).

When considering binge drinking, specifically, research indicates that enhancement and social reasons have the strongest positive associations (Cooper et al., 2015). For example, Patrick and Schulenberg (2011) found above average increases in binge drinking were associated most strongly with above average increases in drinking "to get high" or "because of boredom" across early emerging adulthood (ages 18–22). Further, maintenance of binge drinking from mid-emerging adulthood to young adulthood (ages 22–30), when it normally decreases, was associated most strongly with persistence of drinking to manage problems. To our knowledge, no studies have examined whether extreme binge drinkers are differentially motivated than those who binge drink less intensely.

Using a large sample of college students from several U.S. campuses, we examine whether drinking motives differentiate extreme drinkers from their peers who do not engage in extreme drinking. We define extreme drinking as double the usual binge drinking amount: drinking 8+ drinks for women and 10+ for men on a single occasion (Fairlie, Maggs, & Lanza, 2015; Patrick et al., 2013). We compare extreme drinkers to nonbinge drinkers (<4 drinks for women and <5 drinks

for men per drinking occasion) and binge drinkers (4–7 drinks for women and 5–9 drinks for men) in terms of motives and examine whether changes in drinking motives are related to changes in extreme drinking over time. Based on past research, we hypothesize that, compared to nonbinge and binge drinkers, extreme drinkers will report higher social and enhancement motives for drinking but not necessarily higher coping or conformity motives. We expect that changes in social and enhancement motives will be positively related to changes in extreme drinking. By pooling participant-level data from several studies conducted on different college campuses, we increase generalizability, compared to single-campus studies of extreme drinking (e.g. Fillmore & Jude, 2011; Read et al., 2008). A focus on motives for extreme drinking may help identify students at high-risk for drinking problems and inform preventive efforts that focus on correcting drinking expectancies.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Data come from Project INTEGRATE (see Mun, de la Torre, Atkins, White, Ray, Kim et al., 2015), an integrative data analysis (IDA; Curran & Hussong, 2009) study evaluating the efficacy of brief motivational interventions for reducing college student heavy drinking and related problems. IDA studies pool raw participant-level data from multiple studies and analyze them as a single data set, and can provide many of the same benefits of multi-site trials at a fraction of the cost if study-level heterogeneity can be properly accounted (see Hussong, Curran, & Bauer, 2013; Mun et al., 2015; Mun, Jiao, & Xie, 2016 for detailed discussions). Project INTEGRATE includes data from 24 independent trials at U.S. colleges. For these analyses, we limited the sample to students who were current drinkers at baseline (i.e., drank in the last 30 days; $N = 3518$) from eight studies (Studies 2, 4, 6, 9, 15, 16, 18, and 19) that collected data on drinking motives; see Mun et al. (2015) for descriptions of the schools and student populations and Ray, Kim, White, Larimer, Mun, Clarke et al. (2014) for details on the interventions. The sample was 63.4% women; 70.3% were white, 10.5% Hispanic, 9.7% Asian; 7.4% other or mixed, and 2.1% black. Most students were first-year students (57.4%), 20.3% second, 13.2% third, and 9.0% fourth; and 36.6% were associated with a fraternity or sorority.

Follow-up assessments were conducted at various time points from 1 to 12 months post-baseline due to differences in study designs (see Mun et al., 2015 for details). Five studies (Studies 2, 4, 9, 16, and 18, at five different universities) included 6-month follow-up data ($N = 1373$) and were included in the longitudinal analyses of the current study.

Project INTEGRATE used de-identified existing data and was exempt from review by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB). All studies included in Project INTEGRATE received IRB approval by their respective universities.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Alcohol use and problems

Students reported the *maximum number of drinks* they had on a single drinking occasion or day in the past month, a continuous variable in all studies. We also used measures of the *number of drinking days per typical week* (frequency) and the *total number drinks per typical week* (quantity) in the analysis. For four studies, these two measures were obtained from the Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985), which assessed the number of drinks consumed each day during a typical week in the past month and has been shown to be reliable (Miller, Neal, Roberts, Baer, Cressler, Metrick, & Marlatt, 2002). From the DDQ, we summed the total number of days drinking and the total number of drinks during the week. For the other four studies, participants responded to single items assessing *the number of drinking days* in the past week (or month divided by 4), which was used to

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