



Short Communication

Testing an affective judgment model of distress tolerance in college heavy drinkers

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Relations between affects linked to avoidance options/withstanding options(AO/WO) and distress tolerance(DT) were examined.
- Affects linked to AO-Relieving/WO-Enduring were related to DT-Enduring Capacity.
- Affects linked to AO-Quitting/WO-Persevering were related to DT-Persevering Capacity.
- Affects linked to AO and WO may have an influence on DT.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The objective of this study was to examine the relation between affects linked to avoidance/withstanding options and distress tolerance in heavy drinkers. It has been suggested that the expected rewards of taking withstanding options and the expected punishments of taking avoidance options could have an influence on judgment regarding withstanding ongoing distress. However, there are no studies that have tested this hypothesis. Thus, we measured the affects linked to each option and examined their relations with distress tolerance based on the theoretical/empirical evidence that proves that affects reflect the expected rewards and punishments of certain options. We hypothesized that affects linked to avoidance/withstanding options are closely related to distress tolerance in heavy drinkers.

Methods: Forty heavy drinkers completed a self-report measure that assessed the affective associations of options and took a behavioral task indexing distress tolerance.

Results: Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that affects linked to avoidance/withstanding options are closely associated with distress tolerance, even after controlling for negative emotional experiences and alcohol use problems.

Conclusions: Our findings indicate that affects linked to avoidance/withstanding options may have an important influence on distress tolerance and therefore deserve further explorations.

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1. Introduction

Distress tolerance (DT) is the perceived and/or actual capacity to withstand aversive experiential states (Brown, Lejuez, Kahler, Strong, & Zvolensky, 2005; Simons & Gaher, 2005). DT has been considered to be a crucial factor that contributes to the manifestation, maintenance, and relapse of alcohol abuse (Buckner, Keough, & Schmidt, 2007; Dennhardt & Murphy, 2011; Gorka, Ali, & Daughters, 2012; Howell, Leyro, Hogan, Buckner, & Zvolensky, 2010). However, it remains unclear what mechanisms underlie the process of withstanding distress among heavy drinkers.

Trafton and Gifford (2011) theorized one promising proposal regarding mechanisms that underlie DT. The researchers asserted that DT could be defined as the capability of not responding to an immediate negative reinforcement (NR) opportunity (i.e., a behavioral option that could relieve distress immediately) during distressful states. According to the researchers' model, people estimate the expected rewards (ER) to be gained by not responding to a NR opportunity, and they estimate the expected punishments (EP) to be provided by responding to the opportunity while experiencing distress. People's decisions to withstand distress may be influenced by the results of the estimation.

One possible means to assess the ER/EP of an option is by measuring the affects linked to the option. Slovic and his colleagues suggested that affects linked to certain options could be used as a heuristic attribute when people estimate the ER/EP of the options (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2007). Similarly, Damasio (1994) asserted that learning leads certain images to become marked by positive and

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negative affects, and those affects could be used to predict the future outcomes of taking certain options. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the ER of taking withstanding options (WO; not responding to a NR opportunity) and the EP of taking avoidance options (AO; responding to a NR opportunity) could be assessed by positive affects linked to WO and negative affects linked to AO. People may use these affects as heuristic attributes when deciding whether to withstand distress.

To examine the relation between affects linked to AO/WO and DT in a more detailed manner, we differentiated the types of AO/WO and DT. There are at least two types of distressful situations. The first type can be described as occurring when a person performs a distressful task; in this case, the AO would be to stop performing the task (Quitting). Most behavioral measures of DT assess this type of AO (Seo & Kwon, 2014). In this type of situation, the WO would be to continue performing the task (WO-Persevering), and the relevant DT would be the capacity to persevere with the task (DT-Persevering Capacity). The second type can be described as when a person is distressed by certain negative events but is not performing any specific tasks. In this situation, a person would relieve distress by performing specific activities (Relieving); for heavy drinkers, one of the most salient relieving behaviors would be to drink alcohol (Carpenter & Hasin, 1999; Conger, 1956; Stockwell, Hodgson, & Rankin, 1982). This type of AO could be assessed by the willingness to perform specific relieving behaviors. In this type of situation, the WO would be to endure without relieving distress (WO-Enduring), and the relevant DT would be the capacity to endure ongoing distress (DT-Enduring Capacity).

Our objective was to test the affective judgment model of DT in heavy drinkers. First, we examined whether affects linked to AO-Quitting/WO-Persevering predicted DT-Persevering Capacity using a behavioral measure of DT. Second, we examined whether affective associations of AO-Relieving/WO-Enduring explained DT-Enduring Capacity using a self-report measure that assesses the willingness to drink.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

To recruit participants, we used advertisements in an online research participation system for undergraduates enrolled in psychology classes at a national university in Korea. The minimum drinking level to be included in the study was 12 standard drinks per week for women and 15 for men (Wiers & Kummeling, 2004). A typical standard drink contains 10 g of pure ethanol (Miller, Heather, & Hall, 1991). Forty heavy drinkers (17 women and 23 men) were recruited (alcohol use $M = 25.52$ standard drinks per week, $SD = 8.48$). The mean age was 20.57 ($SD = 1.58$) years. The university's institutional review board on human subject research approved this study, and participants were provided course credit for their participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Affective associations

The Word Association Test to measure the affects linked to an image was developed by Peters and Slovic (1996). The test has been used in many studies and found to have fine concurrent validity (Slovic et al., 1991; Slovic et al., 2007). In accordance with the guidelines of the Word Association Test, participants were requested to list the first five thoughts/images that came to their mind when presented with the phrase “drinking” (AO-Relieving) and to rate the thought/image on a scale ranging from (1) very negative to (7) very positive. The five affect scores were averaged to produce a composite score of affect linked to AO-Relieving. The same procedures were repeated for “no drinking” (WO-Enduring), “performing distressful tasks” (WO-Persevering), and “quitting distressful tasks” (AO-Quitting).

2.2.2. Distress tolerance

The Distress Tolerance Test is a behavioral index of DT developed by Nock and Mendes (2008) and has been found to have fine convergent and discriminative validity (Anestis et al., 2012). Participants were presented with a deck of 64 cards, each of which had a figure that varied by shape, color, and number. Participants were instructed to sort each card beneath one of four cards laid across the table; the examiner would indicate whether the placement of each card was correct or incorrect. Participants needed to sort the first 20 cards, but were free to quit the task at any time thereafter. There were no correct answers with respect to how the participant sorted each card. The examiner responded “correct” to the first 3 cards and “incorrect” to the next 7. The 11th card was “correct” and all of the remaining cards were “incorrect.” The DT-Persevering Capacity was measured by summing the number of cards the participant sorted, with a lower number of sorts indicative of a lower DT.

The researchers of this study developed the Willingness to Drink scale to measure the DT-Enduring Capacity for heavy drinkers. This scale contains three items: 1) “I want to drink alcohol right now”, 2) “I feel a strong impulse to drink and I will act on it”, and 3) “I will drink alcohol soon”. These items were planned to measure the willingness to relieve distress with drinking. Higher scores in the Willingness to Drink scale indicated a low DT-Enduring Capacity. The internal consistency of the instrument in the current study was good ($\alpha = .89$).

The Distress Intolerance Index is a 10-item self-report measure designed to assess the perceived DT (McHugh & Otto, 2012). Items were summed for a total score, with lower scores indicating a greater DT. We included this instrument to test the convergent validity of the Distress Tolerance Test and the Willingness to Drink scale.

2.2.3. Alcohol use and negative affects

The Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test is a 10-item screening tool that is used to identify people who are at risk of developing alcohol problems (Saunders, Aasland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993). The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Negative Affect is a 10-item questionnaire that measures negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). We included these two measures to control for drinking problems and negative affects of participants when examining the relations between the affective associations of AO/WO and DT.

2.3. Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants were requested to complete four self-report measures (i.e., the Alcohol Use disorder identification Test, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Negative Affect, the Word Association Test, and the Distress Intolerance Index) and then take the Distress Tolerance Test. Immediately after quitting the task, participants were requested to complete the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Negative Affect the Word Association Test (AO-Relieving/WO-Enduring) and the Willingness to Drink scale. We administered the Word Association Test twice (before and after the Distress Tolerance Test) because there was evidence that affective associations of certain images could be changed by emotional distress (Slovic et al., 2007). Because the DT-Enduring Capacity was measured after the Distress Tolerance Test, we assessed the affective associations of AO-Relieving/WO-Enduring again immediately after the Distress Tolerance Test.

3. Results

Consistent with the assumption, participants showed increased levels of negative affects after the Distress Tolerance Test, as indicated by the pre and post Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Negative Affect scores [$t(39) = 4.13, p < .001$]. The descriptive statistics and inter-correlations are presented in Table 1. The Distress Tolerance Test and Willingness to Drink scale scores were significantly

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