



## Injunctive norms for alcohol-related consequences and protective behavioral strategies: Effects of gender and year in school

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### ABSTRACT

Perceived drinking norms have received increased attention as one determinant of high levels of college alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems. Excessive drinking is widely visible on college campuses, and students may therefore assume that it is peer-supported (Kitts, 2003). Research into peer relations indicates that the perceived approval of important others predicts drinking behavior (Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Neither the use of alcohol-related protective behavioral strategies nor alcohol-related negative consequences have been investigated in terms of their perceived approval. The purpose of this study was to extend previous research on injunctive norms and assess self-other discrepancies in levels of approval for campus drinking patterns, negative alcohol-related consequences, and protective behavioral strategies. Undergraduate volunteers ( $n = 324$ , 61% female, 67% Caucasian) completed an online survey of drinking patterns; they rated comfort with overall campus drinking, and the acceptability of alcohol-related consequences and protective strategies for themselves and their close friends. As predicted, students expressed lower acceptance of consequences than their friends, and higher acceptance of alcohol-related protective strategies. We observed main effects of gender and year in school. Males and upperclassmen expressed higher acceptance of negative consequences for both self and others, and lower acceptance of protective strategies for both self and others. Implications for prevention programs are discussed.

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High rates of college student alcohol use continue to cause public health concern (Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009). At least two out of five college students report engaging in heavy episodic (binge) drinking, defined as consuming four or more drinks in a drinking episode for a female and five or more drinks in a drinking episode for a male, at least once every two weeks (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002). These elevated levels of drinking are associated with a host of alcohol-related consequences in academic, personal, and legal domains (Park, 2004). The persistent high levels of college alcohol consumption and the consequences associated with drinking highlight the need to better understand the determinants of alcohol use among college students.

Social influence processes contribute to heavy alcohol use via both social modeling and perceived drinking norms (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Norms are defined as “self-instructions to do what is perceived to be correct by members of a culture” (Solomon & Harford, 1984, p. 460), and serve as internalized sources of social influence. Distinctions have been made between two specific types of norms, descriptive and injunctive (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Descriptive norms, defined as perceptions of what others do, include estimates of how much and how often others consume

alcohol. The tendency to overestimate descriptive drinking norms is well documented (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Perkins, 2002) and has been generalized to other risk behaviors: Young adults also overestimate the prevalence of drug use (Martens et al., 2006) and sexual behavior (Lewis, Neighbors, Oster-Aaland, Kirkeby, & Larimer, 2007; Martens et al., 2006). The accuracy of descriptive norms is significant because they predict current drinking behavior (e.g., Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos & Larimer, 2007), and future drinking behavior (e.g., Carey, Borsari, Carey, & Maisto, 2006).

Injunctive drinking norms, defined as what others approve of, include perceptions of the acceptability of alcohol consumption. Across behaviors, students tend to endorse more conservative attitudes for themselves than they ascribe to their peers, a phenomenon known as pluralistic ignorance (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Consistently, injunctive norms related to alcohol use are overestimated (e.g., Borsari & Carey, 2003; Neighbors et al., 2007). Because excessive drinking is highly visible on college campuses and personal attitudes are shared selectively if at all, students may assume that excessive alcohol use is supported by their peers (Kitts, 2003). This would likely place them at risk for elevating their drinking. Indeed, perceived approval of important others is predictive of drinking behavior (e.g., Neighbors et al., 2007), consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 1991).

The observed discrepancy between personal behaviors and beliefs and perceived norms of others' attitudes has been referred to as the

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self-other difference (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Carey et al., 2006). Theory suggests that exaggerated estimates of drinking norms can contribute to a permissive environment that promotes heavier drinking patterns by light/moderate drinkers and/or buffers heavier drinkers from the realization that their use is extreme (Perkins, 2002). However, perceived norms for drinking-related behaviors have rarely been studied. In this regard, two sets of drinking-related behaviors, negative consequences and protective behavioral strategies, provide unique windows into the context of student drinking.

Negative consequences, including hangovers and regretted sexual experiences, are consistently associated with heavy alcohol use (c.f. Park, 2004), and students tend to perceive that other students experience more negative consequences than they do (Baer & Carney, 1993). However, research has not yet investigated the perceived acceptability of these consequences, or the presence of self-other discrepancies in perceptions of approval of consequences. The more acceptable negative consequences are perceived to be, the more individuals might be willing to tolerate the unpleasant consequences of heavy alcohol use. It is likely that if students perceive negative consequences to be acceptable to their peers, they will be less likely to reduce their drinking in order to avoid them and will therefore be more likely to continue to engage in excessive alcohol use.

Protective behavioral strategies (PBS) are specific, cognitive-behavioral strategies that can help reduce risks or negative outcomes of alcohol use. Examples include alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, using a designated driver, and setting a drink limit. More frequent use of PBS predicts lower consumption and fewer alcohol-related problems (e.g. Benton et al., 2004; Martens et al., 2004). Recent research addressing descriptive norms suggests that students perceive their peers as using PBS less than they themselves do (Benton, Downey, Glider, & Benton, 2008). Injunctive norms for PBS have not been studied. The more acceptable PBS are perceived to be by one's peer group, the more likely they are to be used to reduce risky drinking behaviors. Because PBS are commonly incorporated into the content of alcohol interventions, better understanding of their perceived acceptability is important to gauge how likely PBS are to be utilized by clients.

This study had two main goals. First, we sought to replicate past findings on approval levels of global comfort with campus drinking patterns. The *a priori* hypothesis was: (a) students would be less comfortable with campus drinking habits than they perceive their peers to be. Second, we sought to extend past norms research by assessing perceived approval levels of negative consequences and PBS. *A priori* hypotheses were: (b) students will be less accepting of negative consequences than they perceive their peers to be; and (c) students would be more accepting of PBS than they perceive their peers to be. Because negative consequences and PBS differ in their social desirability, examining both in the same sample offers an opportunity to separate response bias (e.g. others are always more extreme than the respondent) from beliefs that others are more permissive of risky behaviors.

Third, we examined whether these patterns varied by gender and year in college. Freshmen appear to be a particularly risky sub-group of college campuses. Drinking tends to increase during transitions to increased independence (Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002), and accordingly freshmen report more alcohol use than upperclassmen (Turrisi, Padilla, & Wiersma, 2000). Moreover, they are more likely to be arrested for an alcohol-related offense than upper-class students (Thompson, Leinfelt, & Smyth, 2006). Descriptive norms research on freshmen has indicated that freshmen perceive other freshmen to drink more alcohol than they themselves do (Lewis et al., 2007). Research has not examined differences in approval levels of negative consequences and PBS between freshmen and upper-class students. Based on past findings, we hypothesized that relative to upperclassmen, (d) freshmen will perceive others as more accepting of negative consequences, and (e) freshmen will perceive others as less accepting of protective behavioral strategies.

Regarding gender, cultural norms condone risky behavior to a greater extent for men than for women (Courtenay, 2003). Research has demonstrated that women place a greater priority on personal health (Weissfeld, Krischt, & Brock, 1990), drink less (Benton et al., 2004), and report fewer alcohol-related problems (Perkins, 2002). Women believe they practice PBS more often than others, so that the self-other difference in descriptive norms is larger for women than for men (Benton et al., 2008). Extending this pattern to perceived injunctive norms, we hypothesized that: (f) women will perceive others as less accepting of negative consequences than men and (g) women will perceive others as more accepting of PBS use than men.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

Participants were 324 undergraduates attending a large north-eastern university. The sample was recruited from introductory psychology courses in the fall semester of 2008. After providing informed consent, small groups of participants (9–18 students per group) completed online surveys about alcohol consumption, alcohol-related problems, self and other attitudes towards drinking consequences, and self and other attitudes towards protective behavior strategies. Each survey carried a unique user identification number to maintain anonymity. In exchange for their participation, students received course credit.

### 1.2. Measures

#### 1.2.1. Descriptive information

Participants provided information regarding gender, age, weight, race/ethnicity, year in college, and residence.

#### 1.2.2. Drinking patterns

For all assessments, a standard drink was defined as a 12 oz can or bottle of beer, a 5 oz glass of table wine, a 12 oz bottle or can of wine cooler, or a 1.5 oz shot of liquor either straight or in a mixed drink. Measures covered alcohol use patterns for the 30 days prior to the assessment. The Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ) (Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985) used a 7-day grid to assess drinking during a typical week and average number of drinks per drinking day. Participants also reported the number of heavy drinking days and frequency of intent to get drunk when consuming alcohol.

#### 1.2.3. Drinking norms

Participants rated items on global comfort (e.g. "How comfortable are you with the drinking habits of the students here") with campus drinking to self, to friend, and to average student on an 11-point scales (1 = not at all comfortable; 11 = very comfortable). Participants rated two sets of items on acceptability to self and to peers on 6-point scales (1 = least acceptable; 6 = most acceptable). The first set ( $n = 22$  items) assessed the acceptability of negative consequences with items adapted from the Brief Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (BYAACQ; Kahler, Strong, & Read, 2005). The instructions for acceptability to self asked participants to "Indicate how acceptable or unacceptable you find each of the following." For acceptability to friends, the instructions were, "Please indicate how you think your friends and close acquaintances on campus feel about each of these behaviors that may result from drinking." The second set ( $n = 13$  items) assessed the acceptability of protective behavioral strategies, with items adapted from the Protective Behavioral Strategies Scale (Martens et al., 2005). For strategy acceptability to self, the instructions read, "Please indicate how acceptable or unacceptable you personally view each strategy. For strategy acceptability to friends, the instructions were, "Please indicate how acceptable or unacceptable your friends and close acquaintances

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