



Short Communication

Defending girlfriends, buddies and oneself: Injunctive norms and male barroom aggression

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Research has demonstrated that young adults tend to overestimate their peers' approval of risky behaviors (i.e., injunctive norms) and that perceived peer approval is associated with actual behavior; however, no empirical studies have assessed injunctive norms in relation to male barroom aggression. The objectives of the present study were to compare young men's own approval of male barroom aggression with their perceptions of approval by male and female peers and to determine the extent that perceived peer approval of male barroom aggression was associated with self-reported physical aggression at a bar, controlling for own approval and heavy episodic drinking.

Method: 525 young adult male university and community college students who reported drinking and going to a bar, club or pub rated their own approval and perceptions of peers' approval of bar aggression on items reflecting four domains of approval: (1) general approval, (2) defend self, (3) defend friend and (4) protect girlfriend.

Results: For all four domains, participants attributed greater approval to male peers than to themselves. Aggression was positively associated with own approval for all domains and with perceived male peer approval for *general approval*, *defend self* and *defend friend*, controlling for heavy episodic drinking and own approval of aggression. Perceived approval by female peers was not associated with increased likelihood of aggression.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that both perceived male peer approval and personal approval are factors associated with male barroom aggression and that addressing approval of barroom aggression is a critical direction for prevention programming.

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1. Introduction

Aggression and violence commonly occur in public drinking establishments (Archer, Holloway, & McLoughlin, 1995; Leonard, Quigley, & Collins, 2002; Parnanen, 1991; Stockwell, Lang, & Rydon, 1993) with men far more likely than women to engage in barroom aggression (Graham & Wells, 2001; Graham, Wells, & Jelley, 2002; Homel, Tomsen, & Thommeny, 1992). A growing body of research indicates that aggression by men in drinking establishments is often perceived by young men as being completely normative and acceptable (Benson & Archer, 2002; Graham & Wells, 2003; Tomsen, 1997) despite the many harms that can result (Hingson, Heeren,

Zakocs, Kopstein, & Wechsler, 2002). Thus, social influences may be important in explaining male barroom aggression.

Research has demonstrated that young adults tend to overestimate their peers' approval of risky behaviors (Neighbors et al., 2008, 2007) and that perceived peer approval is associated with actual behavior. Perceptions regarding the extent to which important others approve of social behaviors (i.e., injunctive norms) (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) have been shown to be important in explaining alcohol use (Borsari & Carey, 2003), gambling (Neighbors et al., 2007) and aggression (Henry et al., 2000; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Further, research on gender-specific norms indicates that normative perceptions for same-sex peers are more important than for opposite-sex peers (Lewis & Neighbors, 2004).

To date, no empirical studies have assessed injunctive norms in relation to male barroom aggression. While ethnographic and qualitative studies on barroom violence indicate that young men perceive a great deal of peer approval for bar aggression as well as peer pressure to

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respond aggressively in certain provoking situations in bars (Benson & Archer, 2002; Tomsen, 1997; Tuck, 1989; see also Wells, Graham, & Tremblay, 2007), the extent to which these perceptions actually influence male barroom aggression is unknown.

The present study addressed two objectives. The first objective was to compare young men's own approval of male barroom aggression with perceptions of their male and female peers' approval of such behavior, thus providing an assessment of the discrepancy between one's own approval and perceived approval of others. The second objective of the present study was to examine the extent to which perceived male and female peer approval of male barroom aggression was associated with the likelihood of engaging in aggression, controlling for the effects of personal approval of aggression and heavy episodic drinking, a known correlate of aggression (see Wells, Mihic, Tremblay, Graham, & Demers, 2008; Wells, Speechley, Koval, & Graham, 2007).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A random sample of 2500 young adult male students (ages 19 to 25) registered at a local university or a community college in a mid-sized city in Southwestern Ontario, Canada was selected for recruitment to participate in an online survey. In March 2009 these students were sent an e-mail invitation and non-respondents were sent up to four follow-up e-mail reminders. Participants were paid \$20 for completing the questionnaire and were entered into a draw for cash prizes (i.e., two cash prizes of \$500 and five cash prizes of \$200). A total of 794 students participated in the survey (response rate = 32%). Excluded from analyses were participants who provided invalid data ($n = 25$, 3%) and those who reported that they had never had an alcoholic drink in their life and/or had never been to a bar, club or pub ($n = 70$, 9%). Data analyses were restricted to complete data, resulting in a final sample size of 525.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Approval of male barroom aggression

Participants rated their own approval and perceptions of male and female peers' approval of bar aggression on items (rated on a 5-point scale) reflecting four domains of approval: 1) *general approval* (7 items), 2) *defend self* (i.e., approval when defending oneself) (4 items), 3) *defend friend* (i.e., approval when defending a friend) (3 items), and 4) *protect girlfriend* (i.e., approval when protecting or defending a girlfriend) (3 items). The latter three domains were based on typical provoking situations in the barroom (Graham & Wells, 2003; Wells, Graham, & Tremblay, 2009). Cronbach's alpha for own approval was .84, .74, .75 and .80 for *general approval*, *defend self*, *defend friend*, and *protect girlfriend*, respectively. Similarly, Cronbach's alpha across the four domains respectively was .83, .80, .79 and .71 for perceived male peer approval and .78, .82, .72 and .68 for perceived female peer approval.

2.2.2. Heavy episodic drinking

Participants were asked how many times they had consumed 5 or more alcoholic drinks in a single day in the previous 12 months. Due to the skewed distribution of this variable, it was dichotomously coded as any consumption of five or more drinks approximately once a week or more (i.e., 52 or more times in the past 12 months) versus no heavy episodic drinking or infrequent heavy episodic drinking (i.e., less than 52 times).

2.2.3. Male barroom aggression

Participants were asked to report the number of times in the previous 12 months they had experienced an incident at a bar, club or pub in which they had grabbed, pushed, shoved, hit or kicked someone or did something else to the person that was physically

aggressive. This was coded as no aggression versus one or more incidents of aggression.

2.2.4. Age and institution

Participants were asked to report their age (categorized as 18 to 21 versus 22 to 25). A dichotomous variable was included reflecting the institution (community college versus university) the student was attending.

2.3. Statistical analyses

For comparisons of own approval of male barroom aggression with perceived approval of male and female peers, within-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were computed, with degrees of freedom adjusted for sphericity where appropriate (i.e., Greenhouse–Geisser) and post-hoc contrasts adjusted for multiple comparisons. Effect sizes for within-subject differences were evaluated with Cohen's d ($<.20$ = small, $.20$ – $.80$ = medium, and $>.80$ = large; Cohen, 1988) calculated using original standard deviations as recommended by Dunlop, Cortina, Vaslow, and Burke (1996) for more conservative estimates.

A series of hierarchical multiple logistic regression models was computed to assess the extent to which perceived peer approval of male barroom aggression was associated with the likelihood of engaging in physical aggression at a bar, with and without controls for own approval. First, heavy episodic drinking, age and campus (i.e., community college versus university) were entered. Second, perceived approval of male and female peers were entered into separate models for each approval domain (i.e., *general approval*, *defend self*, *defend friend*, and *protect girlfriend*). Finally, own approval was entered for each domain.

3. Results

The within-subjects ANOVAs revealed significant differences between participants' own approval and perceived male and female peer approval for each of the four domains, *general approval* ($F = 291.54$, $2/1036$ df , $p < .001$), *defend self* ($F = 118.49$, $2/1029$ df , $p < .001$), *defend friend* ($F = 208.74$, $2/975$ df , $p < .001$), and *protect girlfriend* ($F = 163.50$, $2/1048$, $p < .001$) (see Fig. 1). Post-hoc contrasts indicated that all differences between own approval and perceived male and female peer approval were significant for each approval domain ($d = .13$ to $.82$), with the exception of the contrast between own approval and perceived female peer approval for the *protect girlfriend* domain ($d = .07$, $p = .14$). Large and medium effect sizes were found for the following comparisons: own approval versus perceived male peer approval for the *general approval* domain ($d = .82$, $p < .001$), *protect girlfriend* domain ($d = .58$, $p < .001$) and *defend self* domain ($d = .39$, $p < .001$) and for own versus perceived female peer approval for the *defend friend* ($d = .57$, $p < .001$) and *general approval* domains ($d = .23$, $p < .001$). Overall, perceived male peer approval was higher than own approval for all four domains. Own approval was higher than female approval for defending self and defending a friend and lower for general approval.

Multivariate logistic regression results revealed that perceived male peer approval was significantly and positively associated with male barroom aggression in all models, controlling for heavy episodic drinking, age and campus (see Table 1, Models 2 to 5, Step 1). The effect of perceived male peer approval was reduced when own approval was added to the models (see Models 2 to 5, Step 2), but remained significant in all models with the exception of Model 5 for the *protect girlfriend* domain.

Perceived female peer approval was non-significant in each of the four models in which it was tested prior to entering the score for own approval (see Models 2 to 5, Step 1). However, for the *defend self*

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