



The malleability of injunctive norms among college students

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol use among college students has been associated with injunctive norms, which refer to the perceived acceptability of excessive drinking, and descriptive norms, which refer to perceptions of actual drinking. The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a brief injunctive norms manipulation on both injunctive and descriptive norms about drinking alcohol and to explore differences in the malleability of norms across referent groups, sex, and gender role. Participants were 265 undergraduates (43% male, 70% freshmen) who completed a web-based survey for course credit. A randomly selected half was exposed to a page of information-based feedback about typical student injunctive norms. Relative to the control condition, the manipulation produced lower injunctive and descriptive norms related to typical students' drinking but no change in either type of norm related to close friends. Femininity was associated with less permissive normative beliefs about the acceptability of excessive drinking whereas masculinity was associated with elevated perceptions of peer drinking, but neither sex nor gender role moderated the manipulation effect. We conclude that perceptions of peer approval of drinking are malleable with a very brief information-based manipulation.

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1. Introduction

Excessive alcohol use is common on college campuses. Approximately 40% of college students can be classified as heavy drinkers (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002). Immoderate use of alcohol results in consequences that are damaging to the self, damaging to other people, and costly for institutions (Perkins, 2002b). Common consequences include academic impairment, blackouts, personal injuries, sexual coercion, property damage, fights, and legal costs (Perkins, 2002b). Although perceived as normative, heavy drinking on college campuses compromises the health and welfare of emerging adults.

Perceived social norms regarding alcohol use influence college students' drinking behaviors (Perkins, 2002a; Rimal & Real, 2005). The majority of students overestimate both the amount their peers are drinking (descriptive norms) and the acceptability of excessive drinking (injunctive norms) (Borsari & Carey, 2003). On average, students believe that their own privately held beliefs about excessive drinking are more conservative than those held by their peers, a concept called pluralistic ignorance (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Both general norms theory (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990) and empirical studies specific to college alcohol use support the independent predictive value of descriptive and injunctive norms (e.g., Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004; Lee, Geisner, Lewis, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2007; Real & Rimal, 2007).

Social influence processes may contribute to students' misperceptions about their peers' approval of alcohol use. Behavior associated with excessive alcohol consumption is both highly visible and often discussed, which creates the appearance of acceptance (Real & Rimal, 2007; Suls & Green, 2003). Drinking attitudes are inferred from the most salient observable drinking behaviors and conversations about alcohol with peers; such inferred attitudes may be simultaneously hard to disprove and also divergent from reality. From a social comparison theory perspective, injunctive norms may motivate drinking because of anticipated consequences of conforming or not conforming to the norm: students believe that their peers will reward them for drinking a lot and/or chastise them for drinking little or not at all (Wood, Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997).

The strong association between exaggerated norms and alcohol consumption has led to the development of norms-based interventions. Although both descriptive and injunctive norms influence drinking behaviors in college students, most interventions focus on correcting exaggerated descriptive norms (for reviews see: Lewis & Neighbors, 2006; Walters & Neighbors, 2005). Descriptive norms feedback may consist of presenting participants with levels of alcohol consumption reported by their peers juxtaposed with their own perceptions of their peers' alcohol consumption (e.g., Carey, Henson, Carey, & Maisto, 2009). In contrast, injunctive norms feedback would prompt one to compare personally held beliefs about others' approval of excessive drinking behavior with actual evidence of peer approval (Wenzel, 2001a,b).

Few studies have provided feedback that addresses students' misperceptions about how much others approve of excessive drinking. Only two studies were found (Barnett, Far, Mauss, & Miller, 1996;

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Schroeder & Prentice, 1998) and both employed facilitator-led group discussion. Findings were mixed with regard to changes in injunctive norms as a function of the manipulation. Barnett and colleagues (1996) demonstrated reductions in injunctive and descriptive norms immediately after group discussions that involved feedback about both descriptive and injunctive norms. Schroeder and Prentice (1998) examined the differential effect of a peer-oriented discussion about pluralistic ignorance compared to an individual-oriented discussion about responsible decision making. At follow-ups four to six months after the discussion groups, only male students reported changes in perceived norms, but they were unrelated to condition. Methodological limitations and high attrition at follow-ups prevented strong conclusions about the efficacy of the interventions. Given the limitations of the available literature a more direct approach to changing injunctive norms in college drinkers is warranted.

The primary purpose of this study is to assess the malleability of injunctive norms regarding alcohol use. To do this we designed a brief information-based feedback intervention for college students. We modeled the brief intervention after a series of studies conducted by Wenzel (2001a,b) that manipulated the perceptions of Australian tax payers regarding the acceptability of dishonesty regarding taxpaying. Providing written injunctive norms feedback increased both behavioral intention to be honest in paying taxes (Wenzel, 2001a) as well as actual behavior (Wenzel, 2001b). The adapted intervention alerts students to the common phenomenon of overestimating peer approval for drinking and provides institution-specific feedback regarding disapproval of harmful effects of drinking. The primary study hypothesis is that those who receive injunctive norms feedback will believe that others are less accepting of excessive drinking than those who do not get feedback.

The strength of association between norms and behavior depends on the proximity of the normative referent group to the individual. According to Borsari and Carey (2003), descriptive norms for proximal referent groups (e.g., close friends) are more strongly associated with actual drinking than distal referent groups (e.g., the typical student). However, students tend to overestimate the drinking of more distal referent groups to a greater extent than that of closer referent groups (Carey, Borsari, Carey, & Maisto, 2006). Additional research suggests that norms-based interventions vary in efficacy according to the nature of the normative referent group used (Lewis & Neighbors, 2007; Neighbors et al., 2008). For example, Lewis and Neighbors (2007) demonstrated that use of gender-matched descriptive norms (vs. gender-neutral norms) optimizes efficacy for college women. However, the research regarding the relationship between referent group proximity, injunctive norms, and alcohol consumption is inconsistent (Neighbors et al., 2008). Thus, this study will explore the effect of injunctive norms feedback on perceived norms for two related referent groups: (a) students at Syracuse University and (b) close friends.

A secondary aim of the study is to explore the effect of injunctive norms feedback on descriptive norms. Both injunctive and descriptive norms must be inferred from indirect sources of data including anecdotes and observed behavior. Further, basic research confirms that knowledge of personal traits influence predictions of future behavior (Newman, 1996). Thus, it is possible that students will assume consistency between beliefs and behavior of their peers (i.e., the correspondence bias; Gilbert & Malone, 1995). As injunctive and descriptive norms derive from similar sources and are theoretically related (Cialdini et al., 1990), it is possible that feedback aimed at correcting misperceptions of injunctive norms will also alter descriptive norms. However, although descriptive norms and injunctive norms are related, they can also be discriminated. Cialdini and colleagues (1990) explain that while descriptive norms motivate behavior through a need for conformity, injunctive norms motivate behavior through a desire to avoid sanctions. Furthermore, previous empirical findings demonstrate the statistical independence (Real & Rimal, 2007) and unique predictive power (Larimer et al., 2004) of the two types of norms. Testing the generalizability of an intervention addressing peer approval of excessive

alcohol use to perceptions of peer drinking behavior remains exploratory.

A third aim of the study relates to the relationships of sex and gender role with alcohol use and perceived norms. Sex differences in alcohol consumption are pervasive; male students consistently report higher levels of drinking compared to their female peers (e.g., O'Malley & Johnston, 2002). Furthermore, the degree of pluralistic ignorance in college samples differs by sex, with women overestimating their peers' acceptance of drinking to a larger degree than men (Prentice & Miller, 1993). In contrast to biological sex, gender role can be thought of as one's identification with appropriate behavior and personality characteristics for each sex (Holt & Ellis, 1998).

Traditional masculine gender role predicts health risk behaviors, including alcohol use (Courtenay, 2003). Masculine traits such as acting as a leader and taking risks are correlated with beer drinking and getting drunk (Landrine, Bardwell, & Dean, 1988). Moreover, while alcohol use and one's ability to tolerate alcohol is associated with masculinity, lighter drinking is associated with femininity and weakness (Peralta, 2007). Thus, those who identify with masculine stereotypes may feel more social pressure to drink and to drink excessively compared to those who identify with feminine stereotypes. Among women, those with high masculinity exhibit more social drinking and problems (Kleinke & Hinrichs, 1983). Thus, stereotypical masculinity appears to be a risk factor for excessive drinking and stereotypical femininity appears to be a protective factor. It remains unclear to what extent gender role influences perceptions of drinking norms. Sex and gender role may moderate responses to injunctive norms feedback because both biological sex and identification with gender-specific attributes can influence beliefs about normative drinking behavior. This study seeks to explore whether the effectiveness of injunctive norms feedback varies by sex or by strength of gender role identification (i.e., masculinity and femininity scores).

This study will focus on manipulation-induced group differences on four dependent variables, namely injunctive norms for close friends, injunctive norms for students at Syracuse University, descriptive norms for close friends, and descriptive norms for students at Syracuse University. The feedback and control groups will be compared using brief baseline measures of norms to determine initial group equivalence. Then, to assess the malleability of injunctive and descriptive norms, the groups will be compared after the injunctive norms feedback is presented using a different set of psychometrically sound norms measures. Malleability will be established if baseline norms do not vary by condition and follow-up norms vary systematically.

2. Materials and method

2.1. Participants

Undergraduate students age 18 or older were recruited from introductory psychology courses held at Syracuse University in the Spring of 2009. Study participation was compensated with course credit, which was used to fulfill the course research requirement. The 265 participants averaged 19 years of age ($SD = 1.04$), and 43% were male. Most were freshmen (70%) or sophomores (19%). They identified themselves as White (61%), Asian or Asian-American (29%), or African-American (8%); 8% of the sample also identified as Latino/Hispanic. The sample was representative (i.e., within a couple of percentage points) of the both the 2007 and 2008 first-year classes with regard to sex, and ethnicity, with the exception of Asians/Asian Americans, who were overrepresented in the current sample.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Alcohol use patterns

Typical number of drinks consumed during a typical week over the last 30 days were obtained from a modified version of the Daily Drinking

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