



College students' evaluations of alcohol consequences as positive and negative

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol expectancy, motivation, and consequences measures assume a known valence of 'positive' and 'negative' outcomes. However, different individuals may rate the same consequences of alcohol use as good or bad. The current study examines the extent to which: (a) college students rate researcher-defined positive consequences as good and researcher-defined negative consequences as bad, and (b) these evaluations predict alcohol use and problems after controlling for previous use. In longitudinal self-reports via web-surveys across the first three semesters of college, students ($N = 600$; 54% women) reported their alcohol use and problems, experienced consequences, and evaluations of those consequences. Contrary to the generally-accepted valence of positive consequences, Fun/Social consequences were viewed as neutral or negative by 22% (having more fun) to 73% (relieving boredom) of participants. Over half of participants evaluated each of the Relaxation, Sex, and Image consequences items as neutral or negative. Consistent with the generally-accepted valence of negative consequences, Physical/Behavioral consequences were viewed by the majority as negative, although 11% (getting in trouble with police/authorities) to 34% (doing/saying something embarrassing) of students rated these consequences as neutral or positive. Independent of levels of previous drinking, more positive evaluations of Fun/Social consequences prospectively predicted frequency, quantity, and maximum drinks. Less negative evaluations of Physical/Behavioral consequences predicted more alcohol problems. There is variation in the evaluations of consequences among college students, and understanding characteristics of those who view consequences as positive or negative may have implications for future alcohol-related behaviors and problems.

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1. Introduction

Research on alcohol use has long examined expectations for and experiences with positive and negative consequences of drinking. Drinkers' self-perceptions of how good or bad these consequences are have been less frequently considered, despite the fact that the (un) desirability of particular consequences is assumed by measures of alcohol expectancies and motivations to inspire or deter alcohol use behaviors. For example, measures that ask about whether individuals drink to cheer themselves up assume that these effects are perceived to be positive effects of drinking. Fromme and colleagues (1993) documented the structure of subjective evaluation ratings among college students, such that some hypothetical alcohol effects were largely but not universally rated as positive (e.g., sociability, tension reduction) and others as negative (e.g., cognitive or behavioral impairment). However, some consequences assumed by clinicians and researchers to be negative, such as impaired cognitive functioning, are actually subjectively evaluated as positive by some individual drinkers (Fromme, Stroot, & Kaplan, 1993; Mallett, Bachrach, & Turrisi, 2008; McKee, Hinson, Wall, &

Spriell, 1998; Neighbors, Walker, & Larimer, 2003). Expectancy-value theories (Bauman, Fisher, Bryan, & Chenoweth, 1985, 1989; Bauman, Fisher, & Koch, 1989; Fishbein & Azjen, 1975; Hays, 1985; Kuthar, 2002), for example, emphasize the importance of the perceived value of potential behavioral consequences as formative for behavioral intentions. Individual variation in the valence (i.e., direction) and strength of associated positivity and negativity therefore may be an important factor in understanding decisions to use alcohol.

Although the degree to which individuals consider particular consequences of drinking to be subjectively positive or negative is likely to vary across individuals, empirical evidence for this is largely lacking (Fromme et al., 1986; Jones et al., 2001; Leigh, 1989). Mallett et al. (2008) assessed variability in the positive-negative ratings of so-called "negative" consequences among college students. They found that a small majority of college students who experienced consequences such as hangovers did not rate these experiences as negative: 28% viewed this consequence as neutral and 25% rated it as positive. Similarly, only half of those who experienced physical consequences such as blackouts rated the experience as negative. In order to fully understand college student alcohol use behavior, it is therefore necessary to understand that many young adults, although aware of risks to their health and safety, do not view all consequences as serious or necessary to avoid (Leigh & Lee, 2008). As researchers, we should acknowledge that

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although some items are generally perceived as good or bad, there may be meaningful individual variation in respondents' perceptions. Identifying which consequences are actually perceived as negative, and by whom, will help design stronger intervention programs that capitalize on individuals' motivations to change and are more salient to individuals at risk. In addition, it will help avoid potential iatrogenic effects that may result from health promotion messages indicating that certain consequences – that are coded by researchers as negative but may be perceived by some or perhaps many college students as subjectively rewarding – are likely to happen when drinking heavily. Misattributing behavioral motivations may leave intervention programs ineffective if students feel that they do not apply to their experiences or acknowledge their most salient reasons for drinking.

1.1. The impact of evaluations

The valence of potential alcohol-related consequences, that is whether consequences are perceived as positive or negative, has been shown to vary across people and to predict alcohol use behaviors (McKee et al., 1998). Park (2004) asked students to identify their most negative and most positive drinking event in the prior two months. Students who rated their own negative drinking event as more negative perceived that it would have a greater impact on their future drinking than those who rated their experience as less negative; those who rated their most positive event as more positive perceived it would have a greater impact on their future drinking than those who rated their experience as less positive. Similarly, perceiving alcohol-related problems (e.g., passing out, interfering with work/school obligations) as less negative was associated with heavier drinking and more alcohol-related problems (Gaher & Simons, 2007; Mallett et al., 2008; Neighbors et al., 2003).

The majority of work examining evaluations of positive and negative consequences of drinking has been cross-sectional. For example, lighter and heavier drinkers have different expectancies and evaluations concurrently (Leigh, 1989), but alcohol evaluations may be a response to experienced consequences rather than prospective predictors of use. Longitudinal work regarding how individuals' evaluations of their experienced consequences are associated with future alcohol use behaviors, controlling for prior alcohol use and problems, is required to more fully understand these effects (Gaher & Simons, 2007; Park, 2004). The ways in which evaluations of consequences prospectively predict behavior at later points in time will provide essential information regarding whether and how individuals incorporate and react to positive and negative experiences, and whether evaluations may operate as risk factors for future use and consequences. If evaluations are shown to be an important construct for predicting subsequent alcohol use behavior, they may be an additional target for intervention approaches that encourage individuals to reflect on their experiences by weighing the pros and cons of behavior (e.g., motivational interviewing; Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Understanding evaluations may be an important filter for tailoring the content of a personalized intervention. For example, those who view particular consequences as more negative may be more motivated to avoid them and therefore respond more favorably to certain intervention components, thus making interventions more potent and efficient.

Research questions for the current study were: (1) Do college students evaluate researcher-defined positive consequences as good and researcher-defined negative consequences as bad? and (2) To what extent do evaluations predict alcohol use and subsequent problems (controlling for previous alcohol use)?

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

Data were from the University Life Study (ULS), which is a prospective study of daily experiences among college students. ULS em-

ployed a web-based measurement burst design, with a baseline survey and 14 consecutive daily surveys each semester. Eligible participants were first-year, first-time, full-time students at a large university in the Northeastern U.S. A stratified random sampling procedure was used to achieve a diverse sample of students with respect to gender and race/ethnicity and thus does not represent the university's population. During the first week participants' first semester of classes, recruitment letters were sent to selected students with a pen and \$5 enclosed. Email invitations followed, with secure links to the web-based surveys. Students were invited to complete a baseline survey and then 14 consecutive daily surveys. Data analyzed here were collected from students during Semester 1 (Fall of their first year on campus), Semester 2 (Spring of first year), and Semester 3 (Fall of second year). Incentives for participation included the \$5 pre-incentive (in Semester 1 only), a \$20 baseline survey incentive (in Semesters 1 and 2, increased to \$30 in Semester 3), and \$3 per daily survey incentive with an \$8 completion bonus (increased to \$13 in Semester 3). Participants provided an electronic signature on an online consent form. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and protected by a federal Certificate of Confidentiality.

In total, 746 students (65.6% response rate) completed the Semester 1 baseline survey. The sample self-identified as 25% Hispanic/Latino American. The non-Hispanic/Latino participants were racially diverse; 16% of sample participants self-identified as African American, 23% as Asian American/Pacific Islander American, 27% as European American, and 9% as more than one race. The original sample was 51.9% women. Attrition analyses showed that students retained in Semester 3 did not differ from attriters on Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, self-reported race (i.e., African American, Asian American, European American), age, or Semester 1 binge drinking (all χ^2 and F -tests non-significant at $p < .05$ threshold). However, men were less likely to participate at Semester 3 than women ($\chi^2 (1, n = 744) = 7.26, p < .01$). The sample for the current analyses included individuals who provided complete data on modeled variables (described below) from Semesters 1, 2, and 3 ($N = 600$, 53.7% women).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Evaluations of alcohol consequences

At Semester 2, participants were asked, "Please rate how bad or good each particular effect of drinking would be for you. We want to know if you think a particular effect is bad or good, regardless of whether you expect it to happen to you when you drink alcohol." The response scale range was 0 = *very bad*, 1 = *slightly bad*, 2 = *neutral*, 3 = *slightly good*, 4 = *very good* (adapted from Fromme et al., 1993). Consequences were items from the Importance of Consequences of Drinking (ICOD) short form (Maggs, 1993; Patrick & Maggs, 2010) motivations subscales. Full item content for researcher-coded positive Fun/Social evaluations (5 items, $\alpha = .85$), Relaxation/Coping evaluations (4 items, $\alpha = .83$), Image evaluations (4 items, $\alpha = .82$), and Sex evaluations (2 items, $\alpha = .76$) is presented in the first column of Table 1. The researcher-coded negative Physical and Behavioral evaluations (7 items, $\alpha = .86$) are also shown.

2.2.2. Alcohol behaviors and problems

At Semesters 1 and 3, participants reported on their frequency, typical quantity, and maximum quantity of alcohol use in the past month, as well as alcohol problems. Frequency was measured with the question, "During the last 30 days (one month), how often did you have any kind of drink containing alcohol? By a drink we mean half an ounce of absolute alcohol (e.g., a 12-ounce can [or bottle] of beer or cooler, a 5-ounce glass of wine, or a drink containing 1 shot of liquor or spirits)." Response options were 0 = did not drink, 1 = Once, 2 = 2 to 3 times, 4 = Twice a week, 5 = 3 to 4 times a week, 6 = 5 to 6 times a week, and 7 = everyday. Typical quantity was reported with the question, "During the last 30 days (one month), how many alcoholic

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