

The role of self-consciousness in the experience of alcohol-related consequences among college students[☆]

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Abstract

Heavy drinking among college students is a well-established national concern. An in-depth look at the characteristics and traits of heavy drinking students is an essential precursor to the development of successful targeted interventions with at-risk students. The current study examines the role self-consciousness (private, public, social anxiety) plays in the experience of alcohol-related consequences among a sample of 1,168 student members of campus organizations. Male gender predicted drinking in the sample, while both private self-consciousness and social anxiety predicted less drinking. Public self-consciousness predicted alcohol-related consequences over and above the variance explained by drinking for both males and females. Additionally, both gender and social anxiety moderated the effect of drinking on problems. Heavier drinking female students and heavier drinking students high in social anxiety appear more susceptible to the experience of negative consequences. These results highlight the direct and indirect impact that self-consciousness and gender have on college students' experience of alcohol-related negative consequences.

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1. Introduction

Heavy drinking among college students is a significant health risk associated with negative consequences of varying severity for both heavy drinkers and the campus community (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Wechsler et al., 2002). While there are many intervention studies targeting high risk drinkers and alcohol-related consequences (Barnett & Read, 2005; Larimer, Crounce, Lee, & Kilmer, 2004), researchers seek to examine the underpinnings of students' use to fully understand the nature of college drinking and to aid in the prevention effort. The trait of self-consciousness, a concept pertaining to the attendance of certain aspects of the self, may be particularly relevant in the college student population, where peer influence and desire to succeed may increase self-awareness. Self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) includes a number of specific domains closely related to self-awareness and relevant to students: preoccupation with past, present, and future behavior; sensitivity to inner feelings; recognition of personal positive and negative attributes; introspection; tendency to picture or imagine oneself; awareness of appearance; and concerns regarding others' appraisals. Self-consciousness is divided into two major components – *private self-consciousness* and *public self-consciousness*. A third component, which relates to private and public self-consciousness, is *social anxiety*.

Private self-consciousness is primarily cognitive in nature and pertains to an individuals' attendance to inner thoughts and reflections. One's own needs, desires, and ideas are more salient at higher levels. Public self-consciousness encompasses awareness and concern of the self as a social object that can be influenced by others. Individuals high in public self-consciousness are preoccupied with self-presentation, social identity, and approval seeking. Social anxiety refers to a reaction to self-focused attention accompanied by discomfort felt in the presence of others. Early work with the self-consciousness trait and alcohol use suggested that individuals may use alcohol as a way to avoid negative self-conscious affect and self-evaluation (Hull 1981; Hull & Young, 1983). Self-consciousness, as it relates to social influence, may have a unique relationship to alcohol in the student population where social influences and social identity issues are particularly prominent.

The social context of college is a challenging environment demanding awareness of both the self and of others. Each day, students are faced with social scenarios involving meeting new people and experiencing new situations. At the same time, students are faced with decisions about alcohol use. Pressure from other students has been documented as a major source of influence on students' drinking rates (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Public self-consciousness, or an awareness of how one is viewed by peers, may be related to consumption levels. Froming and Carver (1981) found that public self-consciousness was associated with a greater tendency to be compliant with social pressure. In contrast, high private self-consciousness may serve as a protective factor among college aged drinkers (Rogosch, Chassin, & Sher, 1990) as marked awareness of one's self may supersede outside pressure to conform to drinking norms.

However, recent investigations of self-consciousness on drinking rates have displayed disparate results. Students higher in private self-consciousness had greater associations between private self-consciousness and alcohol expectancies than those lower in private self-consciousness (Bartholow, Sher, & Strathman, 2000). Research with Greek students found that being higher in either private or public self-consciousness served as a protective factor for frequency of drunken behavior among fraternity members, whereas sorority members high in either private or public self-consciousness appeared to drink more than those low in these traits (Park, Sher, & Krull, 2006). Finally, research with social anxiety's impact on problematic drinking has also provided inconsistent findings (see review by Morris, Stewart, & Ham,

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