



## Disparity between the perceived alcohol-related attitudes of parents and peers increases alcohol risk in college students

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### ABSTRACT

Although peer norms have been found to be a particularly strong correlate of alcohol consumption by college students, research suggests that parents also have a significant impact on the behaviors of their children, even after their child has departed for college. The current study investigated the effect of disparity between the perceived approval of alcohol (injunctive norms) of parents and closest friends on college student drinking and consequences, and explored gender differences in this effect. It found that injunctive disparity was significantly correlated with individual drinking and related consequences over and above the strongest known predictor variables of gender, same-sex descriptive norms and drinks per week. Males experienced significantly greater disparity between the beliefs of their parents and their peers, which was related to increased drinking and a greater sense of connection to their same-sex peer group. Among females, greater perceived disparity was associated with greater alcohol-related consequences. These results suggest that it may not be the individual attitudes of parents and peers, but rather the difference between them, that is impacting behavior. Interventions that reduce perceived disparity, either by correcting the over-estimation of peers drinking, or by encouraging parents to stay involved in their children's social lives by promoting socialization with peers whose attitudes more closely match their own, may be beneficial in reducing risky college drinking.

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### 1. Introduction

Whether due to increased access to alcohol, freedom from parental control, or an increase in the salience of peer groups (Turrisi, Mastroleo, Mallett, Larimer, & Kilmer, 2007), numerous studies have shown that students increase their alcohol consumption in college (see Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007 for review). Unfortunately, heavy drinking by students can lead to a wide array of negative consequences, ranging from missed classes and hangovers, to fights, sexual assaults, and even death (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000; Wechsler, Moeykens, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995).

#### 1.1. Peer norms

In the highly social environment of college, alcohol use has been strongly linked to the perceived attitudes and behaviors of peers (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Perkins, 2002). Normative beliefs concerning how much their peers are drinking (descriptive norms), and how much they approve of drinking (injunctive norms), have been found

to be the strongest correlates of alcohol consumption by college students when compared to variables such as race, gender, year in school, fraternity/sorority membership, alcohol expectancies, motives, or even the attitudes of parents (Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007; Perkins, 2002; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005). Research suggests that the norms of closer and more salient peer groups may be more predictive of individual behavior than more distal groups. Thus, the norms of “typical students” are the least predictive of behavior, while those of close same-sex friends have been found to have the greatest influence on drinking and consequences (Korcuska & Thombs, 2003; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004; Lewis, 2007; Thombs, Ray-Tomasek, Osborn, & Olds, 2005).

#### 1.2. Parental norms

Although many parents believe that their influence on their children diminishes once their children are in college (Turrisi, Wiersma, & Hughes, 2000), research suggests that parents continue to have an impact on their children's drinking through early adulthood (Birch, O'Toole, & Kanu, 1997; Brook, Whiteman, Finch, & Cohen, 2000; Turrisi, Jaccard, Taki, Dunnam, & Grimes, 2001; Turrisi et al., 2000). However, it remains unclear whether this influence operates directly (as in behavioral modeling, parental monitoring or via direct communication) or indirectly (for example, by affecting the child's

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choice of friends). Turrisi et al. (2001) who found that students whose parents had spoken to them about alcohol before college drank less and showed less tendencies toward drunkenness in college. Turrisi et al. (2000) found that mothers' communications about alcohol were related to their child's beliefs about binge drinking and its consequences during the first year of college. Alternatively, parent-child attachment has been associated with a greater intolerance of deviance, which is related to a greater socialization with non-deviant peers, which is in turn associated with less drug use (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2006; Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004).

### 1.3. Parents vs. peers

Several studies have investigated the relative influence of parents and peers. Neighbors et al. (2008) found that both greater perceived approval of alcohol use by friends and parents were positively associated with students' drinking. Turrisi et al. (2007) found a significant negative correlation between the frequency of alcohol-related parental communications and the child's descriptive peer norms, as well as the number of friends that drink, or drink to get drunk. Abar and Turrisi (2008) found that the more first-year students perceive that their parents try to find out how they spend their free time, the less likely they were to hang out with heavy-drinking peers, and the less likely they were to drink. However, only average levels of parental monitoring were associated with low friend use – very low or very high levels of monitoring were associated with high friend use.

Wood et al. (2004) found that higher levels of parental involvement in their child's life were associated with weaker relationships between peer influence and alcohol use and consequences. Coombs, Paulson, and Richardson (1991) found that youths with a relationship of respect and understanding with their parents were less involved with drugs and less influenced by drug-oriented peers. Furthermore, youths who abstained from drugs were more likely to report that their parents were more of an influence on them than their peers, whereas users were more likely to report the opposite. Users were also more likely to report that they felt better understood by their friends, and respected their opinions more than their parents. Overall, stronger affiliation with peers was associated with higher levels of substance use. In a study of first-year college students, closest friend drinking was found to be positively associated with individual drinking, except among students that had received a parental drinking intervention (D'Amico et al., 2005). The authors suggested that the intervention had impacted drinking, in part, by reducing the influence of their child's closest friends.

Finally, there is also some evidence suggesting that the gender of the child may be an important consideration when weighing the relative influence of parents and peers. Parents may exert greater influence on female college students (Lo, 1995), while males may be more influenced by their peers (Lo, 1995; Read, Wood, Davidoff, McLacken, & Campbell, 2002).

### 1.4. Parent-peer disparity

Given the considerable evidence of the influence of both parents and peers in college drinking, especially proximal peers such as close friends, several authors have recommended further investigation into the interplay between these important referents (Barnes et al., 2006; Brook et al., 2000; Jones, Hussong, Manning, & Sterrett, 2008; Lee, Geisner, Lewis, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2007; Neighbors et al., 2008).

Thus, the current study investigates the correlates of greater perceived disparity between the perceived approval of alcohol use (injunctive norms) of a college student's parents, and those of their closest friends, on individual drinking and consequences. Based on the literature, the following predictions were made: First, that students will generally perceive their peers as being more approving of alcohol than their parents. Second, greater disparity between perceived peer

and parental approval (computed by subtracting perceived parent approval from perceived peer approval) will be related to increase drinking and consequences. Third, as the literature has suggested that males and females may respond differently to the influence of parents and peers, gender differences will also be explored. It is expected that greater disparity will create greater increases in drinking and consequences among male students.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

Participants were recruited from two west-coast campuses with distinct demographic characteristics. Campus 1 was a large, public research university with an undergraduate enrollment of nearly 30,000 students. Campus 2 was a private mid-size university with approximately 5,500 undergraduate students.

Of the 3753 participants ( $n_1 = 1936$ ;  $n_2 = 1817$ ) who completed the survey, 61% were female. Participants' age ranged from 18–25 years (mean = 19.88,  $sd = 1.36$ ), and their ethnic make-up was 57.4% Caucasian, 18.7% Asian, 10.7% Multiracial, 7.8% "Other", 3.2% African American, 1.7% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and 0.5% American Indian/Alaskan.

### 2.2. Procedure

During the first two weeks of the Fall 2007 semester, 3500 students from each campus received letters informing them of an opportunity to participate in an upcoming study about alcohol use and perceptions of drinking in college. A few days following the initial mailing, two emails were sent to participants. The first email contained a link to the study survey, while the second included a unique pin number required to enter the survey. Upon clicking the link and entering their pin number, students were provided with a campus-specific IRB-approved informed consent form. If consent was provided, participants were administered a survey that took approximately 40 min to complete. A small stipend of \$20 was provided for completion of the survey.

### 2.3. Measures

The survey contained questions on demographics, alcohol use and consequences, injunctive and descriptive norms. Demographic characteristics included age, height, weight, sex, race and ethnicity.

#### 2.3.1. Individual alcohol use

Alcohol consumption was measured using the Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985; Kivlahan, Marlatt, Fromme, Coppel, & Williams, 1990), in which participants reported the typical number of drinks they typically consumed on each day of the week. The variable "drinks per week" was created by summing the seven days of DDQ data for each participant.

#### 2.3.2. Alcohol-related consequences

Alcohol problems were assessed using the Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI; White & Labouvie, 1989), which assesses the occurrence of 25 situations over the past month (i.e. "Not able to do your homework or study for a test" and "Had withdrawal symptoms, that is, felt sick because you stopped or cut down on drinking"). Each item was rated on a scale from 1–4 with 1 indicating "never" and 4 indicating "more than 10 times". Inter-item reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .918$ ). Each participant's consequences were computed by summing their RAPI scores.

#### 2.3.3. Perceived injunctive norms

Participants' perceptions of their parents' and peers' attitudes towards drinking were assessed using the Injunctive Norms Questionnaire (Baer, 1994). Participants were asked to estimate the extent

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