



Short Communication

Using the Extrinsic Affective Simon Test as a
measure of implicit attitudes towards alcohol:
Relationship with drinking behavior and alcohol problems

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Abstract

In apparent contrast to the alleged importance of positive alcohol expectancies in alcohol (ab)use, a series of studies using the Implicit Association Test (IAT; [Greenwald, A. G., McGhee, D. E., & Schwartz, J.L.K. (1998). Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: The Implicit Association Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1464–1480]), found that heavy and light drinkers display more negative implicit attitudes toward alcohol than toward sodas (e.g., [Wiers, R. W., van Woerden, N., Smulders, F. T. Y., & de Jong, P. J. (2002). Implicit and explicit alcohol-related cognitions in heavy and light drinkers. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 111, 648–658]). One explanation for this might be that the negative-alcohol IAT effect reflects an artifact of the IAT procedure and are due to its relative nature and/or its sensitivity to task recoding strategies. Therefore, the present study used a non-relative measure that has been argued to be robust against participants' task recoding strategies (Extrinsic Affective Simon Test; EAST, [De Houwer, J. (2001). A structural and process analysis of the Implicit Association Test. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 443–451]) to test heavy ($n=16$) and light ($n=16$) drinkers' automatic affective associations with alcohol and sodas. Heavy and light drinkers displayed clear positive associations with sodas and neutral (or ambivalent) automatic associations with alcohol. Importantly, positive automatic alcohol associations predicted unique variance of alcohol (mis)use and was the single best predictor of individuals' alcohol problems, underlining the idea that they do play a role in alcohol (mis)use. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Implicit cognition; Attitudes; Alcohol misuse; Alcohol problems

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Insight in people's automatic associations may help explaining the irrational aspects of addictive behaviors. Automatic associations are assumed to be related to relatively spontaneous responses, whereas deliberated associations are assumed to be related to more controlled responses (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). In the absence of sufficient cognitive resources and/or motivation to control, automatic associations are also assumed to determine controllable behaviors. Following this, positive automatic associations may become highly dysfunctional as they may trigger impulsive approach behavior although the individual knows the stimulus is in fact harmful.

In apparent contrast to the alleged importance of positive expectancies in motivating alcohol abuse, a series of studies using the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), found that heavy (and light) drinkers display more negative implicit attitudes toward alcohol than toward sodas (De Houwer, Crombez, Koster, & De Beul, 2004; Wiers, van Woerden, Smulders, & de Jong, 2002). Yet, given its relative nature, the alcohol–soda IAT may at least partly reflect positive associations toward sodas rather than negative associations toward alcohol. Moreover, research investigating the underlying mechanisms of the IAT provided evidence to suggest that the negative alcohol IAT effects may reflect non-associative factors (e.g., salience asymmetries) rather than affective associations (Houben & Wiers, *in press*). Thus, the earlier findings may well underestimate the actual importance of positive implicit associations in alcohol misuse. Therefore, this study used the Extrinsic Affective Simon Test¹ (EAST; De Houwer, 2001), a non-relative measure designed to assess associations with singular targets and arguably less sensitive to non-associative factors like salience asymmetries. We separately tested heavy and light drinkers' automatic associations with alcohol and sodas, and examined the predictive validity of positive automatic associations for (retrospective) alcohol misuse.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and assessments

Participants were 16 heavy drinking students² (11 women; alcohol use: $M=30.0$ standard servings³ per week, $S.D.=18.5$; alcohol problems: $M=12.4$, $S.D.=6.4$) and 16 light drinkers (11 women; alcohol use: $M=6.5$ standard servings per week, $S.D.=4.8$; alcohol problems: $M=4.1$, $S.D.=4.6$). Mean age was 20.3 years ($S.D.=1.8$). Alcohol use was assessed using the timeline follow-back method (Sobell & Sobell, 1990). Alcohol-related problems were assessed with the 18-item Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI;

¹ In this study we used the Extrinsic Affective Simon Test as it was originally designed by De Houwer (2001) and was described in Footnote 4 of his paper. More recently, other versions of the EAST have also been designed using a somewhat different format.

² Heavy and light drinkers were selected based on a screening among 192 undergraduate students who indicated to drink at least one alcoholic consumption per week ($n=163$). We selected all available participants scoring in the highest and lowest 10% of this sample on the basis of average alcohol consumption (as a function of sex) to guarantee sufficient meaningful difference between the heavy and light drinkers. Mean alcohol use in the eventually selected heavy and light drinkers were comparable to the alcohol use reported by Wiers et al. (2002) for their samples (heavy drinkers: 30 vs. 32 standard servings; light drinkers: 6.5 vs. 5.1 standard servings).

³ In The Netherlands a standard serving is the equivalent of 10 g alcohol.

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