Alcohol and Conformity:

Alcohol Consumption and Social Conformity in Undergraduate Freshmen Students

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Abstract

In this experiment, individuals’ opinion of alcohol consumption and the influence of the majority’s opinion regarding the same issue are studied to examine the effects both these variables would have on an individuals’ level of conformity. This research proposes to measure approximately 50 participants’ personal eco-guilt through surveys. Half will receive a manipulation that will induce conformity by providing a majority’s opinion while the other half will fall into a control group. We hypothesize that there are gender differences in conforming to the majority’s opinion on alcohol consumption. We cannot predict which gender is more likely to conform but we will investigate the extent to which they do. If our hypothesis is supported, we can conclude that both variables: group influence (encouraging alcohol consumption; neither encouraging nor discouraging alcohol consumption) and actual behavior (changing to majority’s opinion, not changing to majority’s opinion) strongly predict the extent to which an individual is likely to conform.
Alcohol Consumption and Social Conformity in Undergraduate Freshmen Students

Within the first month of the fall 2011 academic year at Loyola University Chicago, 27 transports to nearby hospitals have already been made due to alcohol consumption and 15 of those required great medical attention for college freshmen students that suffered from severe alcohol intoxication (Lt. Boudelek, 2011). Alcohol consumption among college freshmen students has always been an important public health concern across the United States, mainly because of the various negative consequences that derive from it. Approximately two in five college students engage in problematic drinking behavior (Wechsler, 2002). This problematic style--usually referred to as “binge drinking”--is associated with serious negative consequences including academic difficulties; antisocial behavior; health and psychosocial problems; high-risk sexual behavior; and other risky behavior, such as drinking and driving (Wechsler, 2002). Although alcohol consumption among underage college students are widespread, in an analysis of the 1999 Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (CAS) data, researchers found that college students’ drinking differs from that of their peers who are of legal drinking age. Underage students drink less often, but they have more drinks per occasion when they do drink. This review addresses alcohol consumption and the primary psychosocial variable of normative conformity that is associated with alcohol consumption for college students at Loyola. It begins by reviewing the prevalence of alcohol consumption in college students across the United States, definitions of problematic “binge” drinking that differs from mere alcohol consumption, and the various problems associated with college drinking in general. The latter part of the review focuses on the psychological influence of social conformity. It will provide a definition of conformity and will give examples on how conformity can impact individuals in a social setting. Thus, because of the nature of alcohol consumption and its variability among
college students, the primary purpose of this research study is to examine the psychosocial variable of normative conformity and see how it predicts alcohol consumption and accounts for variation among freshmen college student drinkers.

Prevalence of alcohol consumption in college freshmen students

“Undergraduate freshmen students represent a diverse group of individuals who have unique drinking patterns and different risk factors and concerns related to problematic drinking than the population in general” (Ham, 2002). Alcohol consumption among underage freshmen college students represents a major public health concern. In one of the first studies among college freshmen using DSM-IV criteria, “the prevalence of alcohol abuse was in excess of 10%. In addition a substantial proportion of college freshman appeared to be alcohol dependent according to DSM-IV criteria” (Aertgeerts, 1999). Further, it appears that minimum drinking age laws have failed to reduce the availability of alcohol to underage drinkers or reduce drinking rates among 18–20-year-old students. Approximately one in two underage students (i.e., students under the legal drinking age of 21 years old) reported that alcohol was “very easy” to obtain (Wechsler, 2002).

Definition of alcohol consumption as “problematic drinking” in college students

In order to fully understand why freshmen college students consume alcohol in the dangerous manner in which they do, we must first construct the definition of alcohol consumption and how it interplays with problematic, or binge drinking behavior. Definitions in the literature generally fit into one of the following two categories (1) Drinking rates or levels or (2) Negative alcohol-related consequences experienced. These terms are reviewed here to clarify terms often used in studies of problematic drinking (Baer, 2002):

1. Drinking rates or levels
Research conducted on college student drinking behaviors is usually employed through self-report questionnaires inquiring about drinking quantity or frequency. Our research questions will simply examine overall quantity (i.e., number of standard drinks) or frequency (i.e., days drank alcohol). Generally, alcohol consumption is simply the consumption of alcohol without any specific measure. However, binge drinking is currently defined as the consumption of “at least five consecutive standard drinks in one sitting for men and four consecutive standard drinks in one sitting for women” (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Rimm, 1995). “A standard drink is usually defined as a 12-oz beer, a 4-oz glass of wine, a 12-oz wine cooler, or a 1.25-oz shot of liquor either straight or in a mixed drink” (Wechsler et al., 2000). Thus, binge drinking is measured as the “4 or 5 standard drinks in one sitting within the previous 2 weeks” (Wechsler et al., 2000). Therefore, it can be stated that the frequency of binge drinking is essentially an important component of “problem drinking” in college students. Because our study seeks to find an explanation as well as a solution for the overwhelming number of freshmen students consuming alcohol in a problematic manner, we will focus primarily on freshmen students with binge drinking behaviors at Loyola University Chicago.

2. Problems associated with college drinking

“The pattern of young adult drinking is unique because it seems to be relatively variable and have a transitory course with only a subset of students exhibiting heavy drinking patterns consistently across time into adulthood” (Weingardt et al., 1998). After an initial increase in alcohol consumption, many students show a gradual reduction in alcohol consumption to a more moderate level throughout later years in college and following college. This phenomenon, often called “maturing out” or “developmentally limited alcoholism” (Zucker, 1987), suggests that “as young adults gain more life responsibilities (e.g., employment and family
obligations), their drinking rates decline” (Marlatt, Larimer, Baer, & Quigley, 1993). Although many college students appear to transition into healthier drinking patterns after college, some do not (Weingardt et al., 1998). Moreover, heavy drinking puts these students at risk for experiencing significant negative alcohol-related consequences during their college years (Ham, 2003). Greater frequency of binge drinking has been associated with greater alcohol-related problems (Wechsler et al., 1998, 1999, 2000). Furthermore, findings indicated that alcohol-related problems progress along a continuum (Vik et al., 2000), beginning with greater rates of the more common, relatively less problematic behaviors (i.e., “careless behaviors” such as missing class or getting injured) to more extreme, less frequent behaviors (i.e., “problems with authorities” such as arrests resulting from drinking). Thus, even heavy drinkers who have not experienced problems or experienced minor problems are not immune to experiencing more frequent and/or severe alcohol-related difficulties in the future (Ham, 2003).

3. Gender differences in alcohol consumption

“The heaviest, most frequent and most problematic drinking in college has been documented among men” (Ham, 2003). Overall, male students tend to drink alcohol more frequently and in larger quantities than female students (Clements, 1999). Additionally, male students are more likely to engage in binge drinking and/or risky drinking (Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995) and to meet criteria for an alcohol use disorder (Hill & Chow, 2002) than female students. Gender socialization may play a large role in these differences (Ham, 2003). Women may have been socialized to internalize distress, while men have been socialized to externalize distress, leading to increased drinking behavior in men (Cooper, Russell, Skinner, Frone, & Mudar, 1992).
Overall, according to Perkins (2002), it appears that male drinking college students have more alcohol-related negative consequences than females, but this may not be true when damage to self and more private consequences (i.e., poor academic performance, unintended sexual activity, memory loss, hangovers, nausea, blackouts, and injury to self) is considered. “Male college students tend to have more consequences for self and others that involve public deviance, while female college students tend to have consequences that are personal and relatively private” (Perkins, 2002). When considering both types of negative consequences, there are no visible gender differences. Thus, the definition of ‘‘negative consequences’’ may be important in examining college student behavior, as the negative consequences typically measured are those that are experienced more often by men. This is a limitation of the studies in which gender differences were found (Ham, 2003).

*Definition of Social Conformity*

“Conformity is a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behavior in order to fit in with a group” (Mcleod, 2007). This change is in response to real (involving the physical presence of others) or imagined (involving the pressure of social norms / expectations) group pressure. In a typical situation in which a group of freshmen are discussing their levels of alcohol consumption, there may be a significant amount of group pressure and perhaps a fear of rejection in the mind of any individual. In normative conformity, the atmosphere usually requires a “person’s compliance with the majority of members in the group even if the person privately rejects the groups view” (Mcleod, 2007). Thus, our experiment will study the psychosocial variable of normative conformity in freshmen male and female students to investigate the extent to which social pressure from a majority group can affect a person to conform to the majority’s opinion of alcohol consumption.
Psychosocial influence of normative conformity

In a psychological experiment conducted by Solomon Asch in 1951, normative conformity was brought out in a majority of the participants. The experiment consisted of a naïve participant in a room with seven confederates. The real participant did not know this and was led to believe that the other seven participants were also real participants like themselves. The confederates had agreed to respond incorrectly to a majority of the questions asked just to see if the participant would conform to the incorrect answer as well. The task was simple: each person in the room had to state aloud which comparison line (A, B or C) was most like the target line. The answer was always obvious. The real participant being examined sat at the end of the row and gave his or her answer last. Over the 18 trials about 75% of participants conformed at least once and 25% of participant never conformed (Asch, 1951). This transformative psychological experiment demonstrates the psychosocial influence normative conformity has on an individual within a group setting.

Gender differences in normative conformity

According to Bordens and Horowitz (2002), women are more likely to conform than men under the conditions of normative social influence than under informational social influence conditions. Two explanations offered are: first, gender may serve as a status in newly formed groups, with men cast in the higher status roles and women cast in the lower status roles. Second, women tend to be more sensitive than men to conformity pressures when they have to state their opinions publicly (Bordens & Horowitz, 2002).

Based on the extensive research found in the literature review, we hypothesize that there are gender differences in conforming to the majority’s opinion on alcohol consumption. It is evident that both the majority opinion on alcohol consumption and the psychosocial variable of
normative conformity play an integral role in determining what kind of freshmen are more likely to conform to the majority's opinion in regard to alcohol consumption. By understanding how a majority’s opinion on a serious issue like alcohol can influence an individual’s behavior, we are more capable of predicting whether a male freshmen or a female freshmen student in more likely to conform to the opinion of the majority.

Methods

Participants

In our study we plan on recruiting a sample of convenience that includes at the very least 50 male and female freshmen participants; 25 of which are female and 25 that are male. Participants are free to identify with any ethnic denomination (White, Hispanic, Asian, African American, etc). They also have the option to not identify with any ethnic group at all. The range of our participants is most likely going to be approximately 18-20 years of age. All of our participants will be freshmen male and female college students at Loyola University Chicago. Also, all of the participants are volunteers. The participants will sign a consent form thereby agreeing to take part in the study.

Design

Our research will use a 2(group influence: encouraging alcohol consumption; neither encouraging or discouraging alcohol consumption) x 2(actual behavior: changing to majority’s opinion, not changing to majority’s opinion) between-subjects design with conformity as our dependent variable. We will manipulate the value of opinion (encouraging and discouraging) relating to underage alcohol consumption in freshmen students as our first independent variable (IV) and we will measure actual behavior as our second IV. Based on the IVs, we will then measure the dependent variable (DV) which is the number of times a participant conforms to the
majority’s opinion.

Materials and Procedure

Participants will be asked to complete a short online survey addressing their current opinions in regard to alcohol consumption in underage freshmen students and whether or not they engage in these behaviors. Our control group will consist of just this short survey with no passage before or after to interfere with the results (Appendix A). Our experimental condition will also complete a short survey addressing the same issues of alcohol consumption but there will be a passage before the survey encouraging alcohol consumption in college students (Appendix B). This passage will serve to induce conformity and we will examine how the experimental condition differs from that of the control group in our results. Finally, we will inform every participant of the wellness center and how it can help students understand the dangers of alcohol and problematic drinking behavior.
References


Appendix A: Control

Gender:

Year:

1. About how many alcoholic beverages do you consume in a day?

I don’t drink 1-2 drinks 3-5 drinks 6-9 drinks 10+ drinks

2. What do you think is a safe amount of alcoholic drinks to consume in one hour?

1-3 drinks 4-5 drinks 6-7 drinks 8-9 drinks 10+ drinks

3. How often do you drink alone?

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Daily

4. At what age did you consume your first alcoholic beverage?

5. How many drinks would you consider binge drinking?

6. In the past month have you participated in binge drinking?

7. Have you ever been absent to school or work because of drinking?

8. In the past month have you experienced a "black out" caused by drinking?

9. Have you ever felt pressure from your peers to drink?

10. What is your opinion of underage students drinking alcohol?

Strongly Support Support Indifferent Oppose Strongly Oppose
Appendix B: Experimental

Gender:

Year:

Most college students throughout the Western world view alcohol as a positive experience. Respondents in surveys in the United States, Canada, and Sweden predominantly mention positive sensations and experiences in association with drinking—such as relaxation and sociability—with little mention of harm (Pernanen, 1991). A recent survey conducted by Harris Poll states that 70% of college students that binge drink maintain a GPA between 3.0-3.5. Cahalan (1970) found that the most common result of drinking reported by current drinkers in the United States was that they "felt happy and cheerful." Roizen (1983) reported national survey data in the United States in which 43% of adult male and female drinkers always or usually felt "friendly" (the most common effect) when they drank, compared with 8% who felt "aggressive" or 2% who felt "sad" (see Brodsky & Peele, 1999; Leigh, 1999).

1. About how many alcoholic beverages do you consume in a day?
   I don’t drink  0-2 drinks  3-5 drinks  6-9 drinks  10+ drinks  I only drink socially

2. What do you think is a safe amount of alcoholic drinks to consume in one hour?
   0-1 drinks  2-3 drinks  4-5 drinks  6-7 drinks  8-9 drinks  10+ drinks

3. How often do you drink alone?
   Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often  Daily

4. At what age did you consume your first alcoholic beverage?

5. How many drinks would you consider binge drinking?

6. In the past month have you participated in binge drinking?

7. Have you ever been absent to school or work because of drinking?
8. In the past month have you experienced a "black out" caused by drinking?

9. Have you ever felt pressure from your peers to drink?

10. What is your opinion of underage students drinking alcohol?