

**Effect of Clarifying Students' Misperceptions Associated
With Alcohol Consumption at a Connecticut Public
University**

by
C. Kevin Synnott

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Associated With Alcohol Consumption at a
Connecticut Public University

Charles Kevin Synnott

Abstract

Chief student affairs officers believe that problems with alcohol use are increasing and are searching for ways to cope with them (Gallagher, Harmon, & Lingenfelter, 1994). A new technique used to prevent alcohol abuse is to clarify students' misperceptions regarding (a) their peers' consumption of alcohol (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986a), and (b) their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations (Prentice & Miller, 1993).

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of clarifying students' misperceptions regarding their peers' consumption of alcohol and feelings of comfort in drinking situations. Quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to determine if providing students with information would impact on their perceptions. The study also focused on whether there was a significant difference between males and females regarding their perceptions of their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations.

A posttest-only control-group experimental design was employed to investigate the efficacy of clarifying students' misperceptions. The experimental group was provided with information gleaned from the literature regarding students' misperceptions. Participants were administered a questionnaire developed for this study to determine: (a) their drinking habits (i. e., frequency and quantity), (b) how comfortable they feel in drinking situations, (c) their perceptions regarding their peers' drinking habits, and (d) their perceptions

regarding how comfortable their peers feel in drinking situations.

The findings included: (a) students overestimated the alcohol consumed by their peers; (b) students inaccurately believed that their peers are more comfortable in drinking situations than they are themselves; (c) information appears to have clarified female students' misperceptions associated with feelings of comfort in drinking situations; and (d) there were no significant differences between males and females regarding their misperceptions of their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations.

Focus groups were used to explore in-depth students' responses regarding the intervention effort to provide understanding and insight in order to see reality from their point of view (Krueger, 1994). A theory grounded in reality (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) emerged from this study based on these results. The Preemptory Clarification Theory suggests that activities designed to clarify students' misperceptions regarding their peers' consumption of alcohol and feelings of comfort in drinking situations need to be implemented before students enter the college or university. The Alcohol Consumption Prevention Model: Clarifying Students' Misperceptions was developed to assist administrators and alcohol abuse prevention specialists address this concern.

PREFACE

You do not win a war by treating its victims. It is a fact of medical history that no major public health problem was ever solved by treatment. Smallpox has been practically wiped off the globe, not by daubing the pockmarks with medicine but because Jenner discovered a vaccination. Malaria has been greatly reduced, not by soothing the fevered brow of the malaria victim but by discovering the role of the mosquito and taking appropriate actions. Jonas Salk and his polio vaccine did more than all the devoted therapists massaging the muscles of polio victims. Even tuberculosis, although medical and surgical treatment techniques have greatly improved, has been minimized largely through the education-prevention campaign of the Anti-Tuberculosis League. The analogy is trite but still appropriate. Putting the bulk of our alcoholism funds into treatment rather than into prevention is like running an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff instead of erecting a barricade at the top.

(Royce, 1981, pp. 179-180)

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to

Regis Delaney Synnott

loving wife and friend who made this dream a reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the memory of my mother Margaret "Peggy" Carolan Synnott for the power of example she provided.

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CHAPTER ONE

Framework of the Study

Introduction

National and large regional research studies found that the consumption of alcohol by college students was widespread and the abuse of this drug was serious (Engs, 1977; Engs, Diebold, & Hanson, 1996; Engs & Hanson, 1985, 1986, 1990, 1993; Hanson & Engs, 1984, 1986, 1992, 1995; Hughes & Dodder, 1983a; Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1986, 1991; Meilman, Stone, Gaylor, & Turco, 1990; Presley & Meilman, 1992; Presley, Meilman, & Lyerla, 1994, 1995; Straus & Bacon, 1953; Wechsler, 1996; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994; Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995; Wechsler & McFadden, 1979). Interest in this phenomenon is not ebbing, but appears to be increasing due to the growing number of problems identified with alcohol abuse. For example, Gallagher, Harmon, and Lingenfelter (1994) found that more than 200 chief student affairs officers at four-year institutions believed that problems associated with alcohol use were increasing, and more than 430 chief student affairs officers had an increased interest in addressing alcohol abuse problems and were searching for ways to cope with them.

A new way to address alcohol abuse problems in higher education is to clarify students' misperceptions regarding their peers' drinking patterns, beliefs, and attitudes. Perkins and Berkowitz introduced the theoretical construct of

university and college students' misperceptions regarding their peers' consumption of alcohol as a prevention issue in 1986 (Perkins, 1995). The cornerstone of the theory is that clarifying students' misperceptions might result in fewer alcohol-related problems because perceived norms lose their influence when consensus breaks down (Perkins, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993, 1996).

This study provides insights regarding one method that might be used to clarify students' misperceptions regarding their peers' consumption of alcohol and their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. The technique discussed in this report involves providing students with campus specific information regarding their misperceptions.

Statement of the Problem

Researchers have investigated the phenomenon of students' misperceptions regarding their peers' drinking patterns, beliefs, and attitudes over the past decade (Perkins, 1995). Recent research showed support for this theory. For example, Haines and Spear (1996) reported that the health staff at Northern Illinois University, building on the Perkins and Berkowitz theory, implemented a change strategy that focused on students' misperceptions regarding binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as men drinking five or more drinks and women drinking four or more drinks at anyone time (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). Haines and Spear used a media campaign over a period of five years. They found a dramatic decrease in students' beliefs that binge drinking was the norm and that students'

consumption of alcohol decreased. Schroeder and Prentice (cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996) found that Princeton students reduced their consumption of alcohol after participating in peer-oriented group discussions that included information regarding students' misperceptions associated with their peers' level of comfort with alcohol drinking habits on campus.

The studies mentioned above are encouraging. However, the problems are: (a) research in this area is limited, particularly regarding students' misperceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations, (b) research regarding the differences between male students' perceptions and female students' perceptions regarding the typical male student's and the typical female student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations is lacking, and (c) most researchers use either quantitative or qualitative techniques, but not both.

This study combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to strengthen the research design (Krueger, 1994) and investigates the relationship between clarifying students' misperceptions regarding their peers' consumption of alcohol and feelings of comfort in drinking situations and their perceptions of their peers' consumption of alcohol and feelings of comfort in drinking situations.

Background of the Study

Alcohol Consumption in Higher Education

The practice of drinking alcoholic beverages is common in our society.