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Reactivity to conspicuousness and alcohol use among college students: The moderating effect of alcohol expectancies

Lizabeth A. Crawford, Katherine B. Novak

Abstract

The analysis of self-report data from 147 college undergraduates suggested that alcohol expectancies moderate the effect of a dispositional susceptibility to embarrassment elicited by undesired conspicuousness [center-of-attention-induced embarrassability (CAE)] on drinking behavior. Individuals unlikely to experience embarrassment when they engage in behaviors that make them stand out in a crowd, a common occurrence when one drinks to excess, drank heavily if they expected alcohol to make them more assertive socially. Students with similar beliefs about the effects of alcohol on social interaction who were high in CAE consumed substantially less alcohol than the latter individuals. Their overall levels of drinking were more comparable to those of the low-expectancy participants, suggesting that the disdain for conspicuousness characteristic of people with a susceptibility to CAE may counteract the desire for social disinhibition that often motivates alcohol consumption.

Introduction

Dispositional shyness is associated with low levels of alcohol use when beliefs about the effects of alcohol on social evaluative concerns are held constant (Bruch et al., 1992; Bruch, Rivet, Heimberg, & Levin, 1997). Drawing on Arkin, Lake, and Baumgardner's (1986) self-presentational model of shyness, Bruch et al. (1992, 1997) suggest that shy people minimize their drinking, and subsequent risks for behavioral disinhibition, to reduce their chances of attracting the attention of others in public settings.

While the self-presentational model implies that shy individuals who recognize the potential impact of alcohol on self-regulation and social behavior would be most likely to avoid excessive drinking out of a fear of becoming intoxicated and engaging in inappropriate actions, alcohol expectancies did not moderate the shyness–alcohol use relationship in either of Bruch et al.'s analyses. Similarly, Lewis and O'Neill (2000) found no evidence that the association between shyness and drinking behavior varied across beliefs about the effects of alcohol on social interaction.

As Bruch et al. (1992) suggested earlier, shy students may drink less than peers with similar beliefs about the effects of alcohol on the self-regulation of behavior due in part to their tendencies to avoid social settings altogether. Insofar as this is the case, a model focusing on alcohol use and reactivity to conspicuousness might better reflect students' tendencies to limit their drinking as a self-presentational strategy. This latter susceptibility, referred to here as

center-of-attention-induced embarrassability (CAE), reflects the disdain for conspicuousness in public settings, minus the more global perceptions of social ineptness characteristic of shyness (Miller, 1995). Drawing on the literature reviewed above, we hypothesize that this tendency will result in low levels of drinking primarily among individuals who expect alcohol to reduce their social inhibitions.

Methods

Participants

Participants, 197 undergraduate students (72 males and 125 females) enrolled in introductory social science courses, completed a standardized questionnaire administered in classroom settings. Thirty-five respondents who reported that they never consumed alcohol and 15 cases with incomplete data were dropped from the study, yielding a final sample size of 147.

Measures

CAE was measured using six relevant items from Edelman’s (1987) revised version of Modigliani’s (1968) embarrassability index ($M = 19.2$, $S.D. = 10.6$). The relationship between this specific type of affective reactivity, initially identified by Modigliani, and alcohol use was examined in an earlier analysis (Crawford & Novak, 2000). As was the case in this prior study, the CAE subscale had adequate reliability, yielding an internal consistency coefficient of .75 among the undergraduate sample.

Shyness was measured using the nine items from the abbreviated version of the Cheek and Buss (1981) Shyness Scale ($M = 20.3$, $S.D. = 4.3$, $\alpha = .80$). The extent which participants believed that alcohol affects the quality of their social interactions was measured using the 10 social assertiveness items from Brown, Christiansen, and Goldman’s (1987) Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire ($M = 26.4$, $S.D. = 5.6$, $\alpha = .93$). An index of alcohol use was constructed by adding participants’ standardized responses to the following four questions: average number of drinks consumed per week, average number of drinks consumed per sitting, number of times

Table 1. Effects of CAE, shyness, and alcohol expectancies on undergraduate drinking ($N = 147$)

	1		2		3		4	
	<i>b</i>	β	<i>b</i>	β	<i>b</i>	β	<i>b</i>	β
Constant	-1.37		-5.083*		-0.21		-4.65	
CAE	-0.01	-.09	0.24	.72				
Shyness					-0.11	-.14	0.12	.14
Expectancy	0.13**	.20	0.27**	.44	0.14**	.23	0.32	.51
Female	-2.21***	-.13	-2.31***	-.32	-2.09***	-.29	-2.09***	-.29
Peers’ drinking	0.48***	.35	0.51***	.37	0.46***	.33	0.47**	.34
CAE \times Expect			-0.01*	-.92				
Shyness \times Expect							-0.01	-.47
R^2	.255		.280		.264		.269	

* $P < .05$ (two-tailed test)

** $P < .01$ (two-tailed test)

*** $P < .001$ (two-tailed test)

intoxicated during the month prior to the completion of the survey, and the number of days during the past 2 weeks during which respondents consumed five or more alcoholic beverages ($\alpha = .89$). Both gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and an index constructed based on students' estimates of peers' drinking behaviors (drinks consumed per week, per sitting, and times intoxicated during the past month) were included in all higher order analyses as control variables.

Results

A series of hierarchical Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions were used to assess the nature of the relationships in question. Although the interaction between shyness, beliefs about the effects of alcohol on social assertiveness, and drinking behavior was not statistically significant, the effect of CAE on levels of alcohol use significantly varied across levels of alcohol expectancy (Table 1).

The nature of the interaction between CAE, expectancies, and alcohol use (calculated using the unstandardized regression equation from Column 2 of Table 1) is displayed graphically in Fig. 1.¹ As hypothesized, CAE was associated with low levels of drinking, but only among students

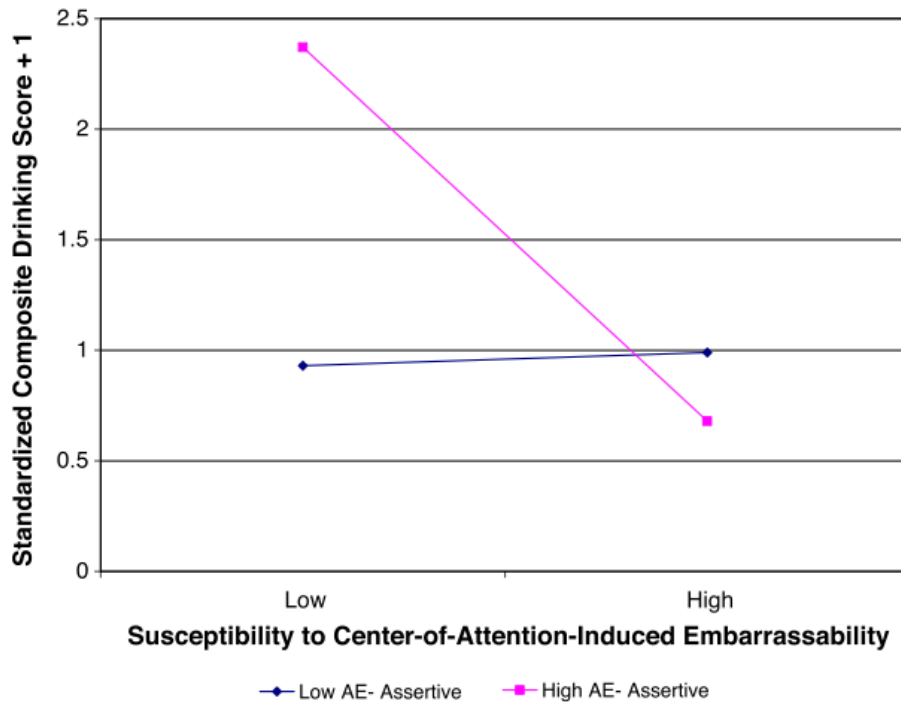


Figure 1. Effects of CAE and alcohol expectancies on undergraduate drinking ($N = 147$)

¹ Levels of both CAE and expectations of social assertiveness were varied from low (one standard deviation below the sample mean) to high (one standard deviation above the sample mean), while all other model variables were held constant at their mean values from Table 1 (see Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983 for a further discussion of this method of interpreting interaction coefficients).

who believed that consuming alcohol made them more socially assertive. Students who believed in the assertiveness-enhancing properties of alcohol but tended to experience embarrassment in situations in which they were the focus of others' attentions had the lowest composite drinking scores, with predicted levels of alcohol use slightly below those of the low-expectancy respondents. In contrast, students who expected alcohol to enhance their levels of social assertiveness but did not report that they experienced negative affect when their actions drew the attentions of others had composite drinking scores substantially higher than the other study participants.

Discussion

This latter effect is notable when placed within the context of the literature on alcohol expectancies and undergraduate drinking. The belief that alcohol transforms social interaction in a positive fashion has consistently been associated with high levels of alcohol consumption, leading researchers to conclude that alcohol expectancies are an important determinant of alcohol use and abuse among college populations (Baer, 2002). The results of this analysis suggest that this may not be the case for a particular subgroup of students, namely, those individuals with dispositional sensitivities to CAE, whose tendencies to experience embarrassment in situations in which they stand out to others may render the assertiveness-enhancing properties of alcohol substantially less appealing.

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