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Who is the typical college student? Implications for personalized normative feedback interventions

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Abstract

Personalized normative feedback approaches focus on correcting overestimated peer drinking norms in order to reduce problematic drinking among college students. Generally, personalized normative feedback utilizes the “typical college student” as a normative referent. Prior research has found these interventions to be less effective for women and has suggested the implementation of the typical student referent as one possible explanation. The current research explored how the typical college student is perceived when estimating peer drinking norms. Participants included 182 (98 women, 84 men) students who reported consuming 5/4 or more drinks for men/ women on at least one occasion in the previous month. Participants completed a battery of questionnaires on computers located in small private rooms assessing their drinking behavior, perceptions of “typical student” drinking behavior, and demographics of the perceived “typical college student.” Overall, the majority of students perceived the typical student to be male. More specifically, the vast majority of men and about half of women perceived the typical student as male when estimating drinking norms. These findings provide empirical corroboration for previous researchers’ suggestions that both men and women tend to think of the typical college student as male when estimating peer drinking norms. Results are discussed in terms of implications for personalized normative feedback interventions.

Keywords

Alcohol; Social norms; Gender

A significant amount of research focuses on how to reduce problematic drinking among college students. One heavily studied intervention is the social norms approach, which focuses on correcting overestimated peer drinking norms in order to reduce heavy drinking behavior. Social marketing and personalized normative feedback are the two forms of social norms approaches, both of which most often use the “typical college student” as a referent when providing actual drinking norms (Borsari & Carey, 2000; Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). Typical college student norms, or gender-neutral norms, are the combined average drinking norms for male and female college students.

Personalized normative feedback interventions provide students with information about actual student drinking norms. In addition, feedback provides comparisons between the student’s drinking pattern and the actual drinking norm and between the student’s perceptions of the norm with the actual drinking norm. This information points out two normative deviations for heavy drinking college students: “most students don’t drink as much as you do” and “most students don’t drink as much as you think they do.”

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Exactly who students are thinking about when conceptualizing the typical college student when estimating drinking norms and when receiving personalized normative feedback is an important question because these perceptions may impact the effectiveness of personalized normative feedback. Prior research using the typical student as a referent has found normative feedback to be less effective for women. For instance, Prentice and Miller (1993) demonstrated at an 8-week follow-up assessment, men had corrected perceptions of injunctive norms whereas women showed no change. Previous researchers have suggested but not evaluated whether normative information utilizing the typical student as a referent might have a smaller effect on women's drinking because the typical student could potentially be thought of as primarily male by both men and women (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004). According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Social Impact Theory (Latane, 1981), information relating to more socially proximal comparison referents should be perceived as more relevant and have greater influence than information relating to more distal comparison referents. For women, the typical college student may be too distal of a comparison referent if women indeed perceive the typical student as male. Thus, for women, normative information may be less effective due to the more distal male comparison referent.

One possible explanation for the typical student being perceived as male is that drinking may be thought of as primarily a male activity. Specifically, research has stated that drinking is integral to a male college student's social identity (Prentice & Miller, 1993). In addition, research has demonstrated that college students perceive men to have more social pressure to engage in drinking behavior and to feel more embarrassment if they express concerns over drinking (Suls & Green, 2003). If drinking is thought of as a male activity then both male and female students may perceive the typical student as male when estimating peer drinking norms.

1. Current research

The present research was designed to evaluate how college students perceive the typical student when estimating drinking norms. We expected the typical student to be perceived as male by both women and men. We also assessed additional demographic information for the perceived typical college student.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants included 182 (98 women, 84 men) students from undergraduate psychology classes who reported consuming 5/4 or more drinks for men/women on at least one occasion in the previous month. The average age of participants was 20.55 years ($SD=3.23$). Ethnicity was 89% White, Non-Hispanic, 4% African American, and 7% other. Students received extra course credit for participation.

Participants were recruited from the psychology subject pool for a larger study evaluating the efficacy of a normative feedback intervention. Details regarding the intervention and its efficacy are provided elsewhere (Lewis & Neighbors, submitted for publication). As part of this study, participants completed a battery of questionnaires on computers located in small private rooms assessing their drinking behavior and perceptions of typical student drinking behavior. Afterward, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire representing the profile of the typical student they pictured when providing drinking norm estimates. Students were provided with the following instructions: "Think back to when you were answering questions about the typical college student. Please fill in the following demographic information for your perception of the typical college student." Requested information included sex, ethnicity, age, height, weight, class standing, Greek affiliation, and residence status.

3. Results

3.1. Perceptions of typical student gender

A chi-square test for independence was conducted to determine if both female and male college students perceived the typical college student as male when estimating drinking norms, $\chi^2(1, n=176)=45.75, p<.0001$. When estimating drinking norms, male students primarily perceived the typical student as male. The vast majority (75; 94.94%) of men perceived the typical student as male; whereas, only 4 men (5.06%) perceived the typical student as female when estimating drinking norms. About half of women (46; 47.52%) perceived the typical student as male when estimating drinking norms; whereas, the remaining women perceived the typical student as female (51; 52.58%).

Both perceived gender-specific (i.e., perceived male drinking and perceived female drinking) and perceived gender-nonspecific typical weekly drinking norms predicted actual weekly drinking behavior for all three groups (i.e., men who perceived the typical student as male, females who perceived the typical student as male, and females who perceived the typical student as female). However, there were not differences among these groups ($t_s<1$). Table 1 shows correlations for perceived weekly drinking and actual drinking.

3.2. Perceived typical student demographics by perceived typical student sex

Regarding other demographic variables of the perceived typical student, all male students perceived the typical college student as White, Non-Hispanic (100%), 20.2 years of age ($SD=.96$), with a height 70.76 in. ($SD=1.84$) weighing 176.1 lb ($SD=20.84$). Men also perceived the typical student to be a sophomore (48.1%), junior (39.2%), or freshman (12.7%) with full-time status (100%) living off campus (57.5%), in the dorms (40%), or other (2.5%). Finally, men overwhelmingly thought that the typical student had no Greek affiliation (96.3%).

For women who perceived the typical college student as male, they perceived the typical student as White, Non-Hispanic (100%), 20.33 years of age ($SD=1.06$), with a height 71.5 in. ($SD=1.36$) weighing 179.89 lb ($SD=14.88$). They also perceived the typical student to be a junior (50.0%), sophomore (41.3%), or freshman (8.7%) with full-time status (100%). Women who perceived the typical student as male thought that the typical student lived off campus (66.67%), in the dorms (26.67%), or other (6.67%). These women also perceived the typical student primarily as having no Greek affiliation (82.61%).

Finally, women students who perceived the typical college student as female further perceived the typical student as White, Non-Hispanic (100%), 19.67 years of age ($SD=1.13$), with a height of 66.1 in. ($SD=1.81$) weighing 135.35 lb ($SD=19.24$). Women perceived the typical student to be a sophomore (43.1%), freshman (33.3%), junior (15.7%), or senior (7.9%) with full-time status (100%). Women who perceived the typical student as female thought that the typical student lived in the dorms (50.9%), off campus (41.2%), or other (7.9%). These women also perceived the typical student primarily as having no Greek affiliation (82.4%).

3.3. Perceptions of typical student demographics

All students perceived the typical student as White, Non-Hispanic (100%) and being enrolled full-time (100%). Tables 2-5 show frequencies for student demographics and perceived demographics for class standing, living status, age and Greek affiliation.

3.4. Actual campus demographics

Actual demographic data for the campus reveals that the typical student's ethnicity is White, Non-Hispanic (89.38%; Black, Non-Hispanic, 1.31%; American Indian, 1.02%; Hispanic, .54%; and other, 6.55%), under twenty-one (70.4%; ages 22–24 22%) and is enrolled full-time

(89.1%; part-time, 10.9%). The typical student lives off campus (68%; on campus 32%) and is a freshman (32%, sophomore 22%, junior 18%, and senior 27%). Male students (57.2%) slightly outnumber females (42.8%) and less than 1% of the student body are Greek members.

4. Discussion

Previous research has found that normative feedback is less effective at correcting overestimated peer drinking norms for women compared to men (Prentice & Miller, 1993). It has been suggested that normative information utilizing the typical student as a referent might have a smaller effect on women's drinking because the typical student could potentially be thought of as primarily male by both men and women (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004).

The current research is the first research to empirically evaluate and provide support for this suggestion. Results indicate that when estimating drinking norms for the typical college student, men perceive the typical college student as male. Furthermore, approximately half of women also perceive the typical student as male when estimating typical student drinking norms.

Perceived typical weekly drinking norms for women, men, and the typical student all positively correlated with actual weekly drinking behavior. However, there were no differences among men who perceived the typical student as male, females who perceived the typical student as male, and females who perceived the typical student as female. This finding suggests that although females perceived the typical student as male and female this difference may not relate to actual drinking behavior as previously suggested (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004).

Although women do perceive the typical student as both male and female, this does not appear to relate to actual weekly drinking. Moreover, it is difficult to determine how these perceptions would relate to social norms approaches. The finding that there was no difference between women who perceived the typical student as male and women who perceived the typical student as female and actual weekly drinking does not indicate how these perceptions might impact the efficacy of social norms approaches. Future research is necessary to determine if perceptions of typical student sex relates to intervention efficacy.

These findings have direct implications for personalized normative feedback interventions. Personalized normative feedback that is gender-specific may be more appropriate for women because females are less likely to conceptualize the typical student as being of their same gender. Gender-specific normative feedback might also be more appropriate for women because normative information would be more proximal, presumably more relevant, and because the actual norms provided would indicate less typical drinking relative to gender-nonspecific norms. However, applying gender-specific norms for men may not generate the same effects. Men already primarily perceive the typical drinking college student as male when estimating peer drinking norms, which means that typical student feedback is in a sense already gender-specific for men. In addition, research has consistently demonstrated that men report drinking more than women (Ham & Hope, 2003). As a result, the combined drinking norms for women and men (i.e., typical student or gender-neutral drinking norms) are higher than what women actually drink and lower than the average of what men actually report drinking. Because typical student drinking norms are lower than the average of what men drink, gender-specific feedback would utilize more prevalent drinking norms for men. By prescribing more prevalent drinking norms, gender specificity could weaken the effect of normative feedback for men while not potentially gaining the benefits of a more proximal referent group.

It should be noted that this sample of students consists of heavy drinkers, primarily White, Non-Hispanic, psychology students from one campus. Perceptions of the typical student may differ with another sample. Moreover, this research did not explore the nature of how perceptions of the typical student relate to efficacy of social norms approaches. Future research is necessary to identify if perceptions of typical student sex will have implications for social norms approaches. Overall, findings indicate that not only are perceptions of college students' drinking behavior important but also how students perceive the typical college student, which are relevant and worthy of further investigation.

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Table 1

Correlations of perceived typical weekly drinking with actual weekly drinking among perception groups

	Male/Male	Female/Male	Female/Female
Perceived female drinking	.33**	.36*	.36**
Perceived male drinking	.38***	.44**	.52***
Perceived typical student drinking	.49***	.42**	.36**

*
 $p < .05$.**
 $p < .01$.***
 $p < .001$.

Male/Male = men who perceived the typical student as male. Female/Male = women who perceived the typical student as male. Female/Female = women who perceived the typical student as female.

Table 2

Frequencies of class standing and perceived class standing

	Freshmen	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Total
Perceived freshmen	27 (33.33%)	2 (4.88%)	2 (6.67%)	0 (0%)	31
Perceived sophomore	33 (40.74%)	32 (78.05%)	9 (30.00%)	5 (21.74%)	79
Perceived junior	21 (25.93%)	7 (17.07%)	19 (63.33%)	14 (60.87%)	61
Perceived senior	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (17.39%)	4
Total	81	41	30	23	175

Table 3

Frequencies of living status by perceived living status

	Dormitory	Greek house	Off campus	With parents	Total
Perceived dormitory	43 (53.09%)	1 (16.67%)	23 (30.67%)	3 (23.08%)	70
Perceived Greek house	1 (1.23%)	4 (66.67%)	1 (1.33%)	1 (7.69%)	7
Perceived off campus	37 (45.68%)	1 (16.67%)	51 (68.00%)	7 (53.85%)	96
Perceived with parents	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (15.38%)	2
Total	81	6	75	13	175

Table 4

Frequencies of age and perceived age

	Under 21	21 or over	Total
Perceived under 21	102 (82.26%)	24 (41.38%)	126
Perceived 21 or over	22 (17.74%)	34 (58.62%)	56
Total	124	58	182

Table 5

Frequencies of Greek membership and perceived Greek membership

	Non-Greek	Greek	Total
Perceived Non-Greek	146 (92.41%)	8 (53.33%)	154
Perceived Greek	12 (7.59%)	7 (46.67%)	19
Total	158	15	173