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Resident Assistant and College Students' Perceptions of Alcohol Use

John J. King, Ed.D.

Roger Williams University, 1 Old Ferry Road, Bristol, RI 02909

Brian Borsari, Ph.D., and

Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences Service, Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, 830 Chalkstone Avenue, Providence, RI 02908 and Brown University, Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, Box G-S121-5, Providence, RI 02912

Jie Chen, Ph.D.

University of Massachusetts at Boston, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125

Abstract

Resident assistants (RAs) are often involved in prevention efforts addressing the problem of college drinking. This project investigated the perceptions that 60 RAs and 662 college students have of each other's drinking and attitudes towards alcohol use. Students' self-reported frequency, quantity, and binge drinking levels were all significantly higher than their friends, students on campus, and RAs. RA perceptions of general student drinking were not significantly different than the self-reported use of students. Perceptions of RA alcohol use were significantly related to the students' self-reported drinking. Findings recommend the incorporation of RAs in social norms interventions for students.

1.1 Introduction

Heavy drinking among college students in the United States has been linked to a wide variety of consequences ranging from having their sleep interrupted to physical assault and even death (Hingson, Edwards, Heeren, & Rosenbloom, 2009; Perkins, 2002b). On residential campuses, undergraduate resident assistants (RAs) are closely involved in alcohol education efforts, prevention, and policy enforcement (Blimling, 1995). Therefore, RAs play important and influential roles in the lives of other students and in institutional efforts related to alcohol control policies and role modeling (Perkins, 2002a).

Currently, the primary manner in which resident assistants are involved in alcohol interventions is through the enforcement of alcohol policies. Social norms marketing campaigns (SNM) are an example of interventions that would benefit from the assistance of RAs (Perkins, 2003). The theory of normative social behavior (TSNB; Rimal, 2008; Rimal & Real, 2003) posits that the more extreme the perception of other students' drinking behaviors (descriptive norms) and attitudes towards drinking (injunctive norms), the more likely that that student will exhibit heavy drinking. Therefore, using mass media campaigns (posters, flyers, emails, newspaper ads) to provide correct campus norms (e.g., "65% of University X students drink four or fewer

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Corresponding author: Brian Borsari, Ph.D, Assistant Professor (Research), Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, Brown University, Box G-S121-5, Providence, RI 02903, Office: 1-401-863-6659, FAX: 1-401-863-6697, Brian_Borsari@brown.edu.

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drinks when they party”) will reduce on-campus alcohol use. Recent research indicates that SNM leads to more accurate perceptions of the campus norm as well as reductions in personal alcohol use and problems (e.g., DeJong et al., 2006; Turner, Perkins, & Bauerle, 2008).

Given that RAs are placed in a unique position enabling them to shape student culture through enforcement and modeling, it is surprising that only one study has examined RA and student alcohol use (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986). Results indicated that RA alcohol consumption levels were close to general student levels, yet both RAs and students perceived a more liberal drinking attitude on campus than actually existed. In this study, we sought to replicate and expand this research. First, we hypothesized that RA and student perceptions of each others' drinking behaviors and attitudes would be elevated. Second, we hypothesized that the students' perceptions of RA drinking influence their personal alcohol use.

2.1 Materials and Methods

2.2 Design

This cross-sectional study administered surveys at four colleges in the Northeast US. Campuses were similar in that they had a minimum of 80% undergraduates living on campus, residence halls that primarily housed students under the age of 21, no residential fraternities or sororities, and no social norms marketing campaigns. Residence halls with first and second year students and their RAs were invited to participate voluntarily in the study. Surveys took 10-15 minutes to complete and were administered from April to early May. To avoid the confounding influence of high-drinking periods of the school year (e.g., Del Boca, Darkes, Greenbaum, & Goldman, 2004), the surveys were administered at least 30 days after the completion of spring break and prior to any spring weekend/concert celebratory event at the end of the semester. Administering the study at the end of spring semester ensured that RAs and students had close to a full academic year to observe each other. A random prize drawing was offered for respondents in each institution. All procedures were approved by IRB of each site.

2.3 Participants

The survey was delivered to a total of 1,721 students living in residence halls at four New England colleges in three states. Students returned a total of 733 surveys (43% overall response rate). There were 662 useable surveys used in the analyses, a return rate of 39% (individual site useable return rates ranged from 34% to 44%), comparable to other large scale surveys with college students (CORE, 2007; Wechsler et al., 2002). Regarding the RAs, 60 out of a total of 70 RAs completed the surveys for a useable return rate of 86% (range 63.5% to 91.6%).

Of these 722 respondents in the final sample (662 students and 60 RAs), almost 90% were first or second year students (29 RAs and 617 students). The ethnicity of the students was: Caucasian (82%), followed by Asian (5%), Hispanic (3%), black (3%), or other (5%). The ethnicity of the RAs was: Caucasian (71%), followed by black (8%), other (8%), Hispanic (3%) and Asian (2%).

2.4 Measures

Students and RAs completed the *Campus Survey of Alcohol and Other Drug Norms* (Presley, Meilman, Cashin, & Lyerla, 1996). Demographic variables included age, ethnic origin, gender, resident status, extracurricular activities, and approximate cumulative grade point average. Binge drinking was defined as consuming five or more alcoholic drinks in a row within the past two weeks. Although a gender-specific definition for binge drinking has been developed (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2004), we used a 5-drink cutoff to be consistent with the Berkowitz and Perkins (1986) study. With permission, the measure was amended to include items assessing personal and others' alcohol use and attitudes. The survey

used in this project demonstrated excellent construct validity and item reliability tests (CORE, 2007).

3.1 Results

3.2 Preliminary Analyses

A review of Q-Q plots and normality tests made it apparent that non-parametric analyses (e.g., Mann-Whitney U) and Poisson regressions were required to test six models of student alcohol use. Because the survey response options for the frequency questions offered ranges without specific numeric values, all variable responses pertaining to frequency were weighted on an annual value basis.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted among the four sites to test for site differences. There were no RA site differences; however, students at one site reported significantly greater frequency ($F = 4.77, p = .003$), quantity ($F = 11.63, p = .000$), and binge drinking ($F = 9.82, p = .000$). Therefore, we ran models using a dummy-coded site variable in the analyses of RA with merged data. The pattern of results did not significantly differ by site; therefore, the data for the four campuses were merged for the subsequent analyses.

3.2 Students

Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations of self-reported alcohol use and attitudes, as well as perceptions of others. Mann-Whitney U tests revealed that students perceived RAs as drinking more per occasion ($z = -4.826, p < .0001$) and drinking more often ($z = -3.334, p < .0001$) than the RAs reported themselves (Table 1, superscripts a and n, respectively). Students' perceptions of other students' quantity ($z = -12.431, p < .0001$) and frequency ($z = -17.04, p = .000$) of drinking was greater than their perceptions of RAs' drinking frequency and quantity (superscripts j and i). There were no gender differences in the students' perceptions of RA drinking.

3.3 Resident Assistants

RAs did not perceive students to consume alcohol significantly more per occasion than students self-reported ($z = -0.474, p = 0.6357$; superscript b). However, RA staff members did perceive students to consume alcohol more frequently than students self-reported ($z = 3.80; p = .000$; superscript m). Regarding their personal use, RAs reported drinking less per occasion ($z = -4.548, p < 0.0001$; superscript c), less frequently ($z = -3.97, p < .001$; superscript d), and less binge drinking ($z = -4.583, p < 0.0001$; superscript e) than the students reported. Finally, Wilcoxon Sign Rank tests for paired data revealed that RAs perceived other RAs as consuming more drinks per occasion ($z = -3.551, p < .0001$, superscript g), but not drinking more frequently ($z = 1.30, p = .193$, superscript h), than they themselves did. No significant difference was found between genders in the self-reported quantity and frequency of alcohol use of resident assistants.

3.4 Attitudes towards drinking

Mann-Whitney U tests indicated that RAs perceived students to have significantly more liberal attitudes about alcohol use than the self-reported attitudes of students ($z = 4.236, p < 0.0001$, superscript f). RA self-reported attitudes toward alcohol consumption were more conservative than students' self-reported attitudes ($z = -4.250, p < 0.0001$, superscript k).

3.5 Predictors of self-reported alcohol use

A series of Poisson regression models were created to test whether ethnicity, gender, and the perception of (a) friends' drinking; (b) the drinking of students in general; and (c) RA drinking

was associated with student self-reported alcohol use. To avoid multicollinearity, (Draper & Smith, 1998) we decided to conduct three separate Poisson regressions, and parallel models were created for frequency and quantity of use (Table 2). The perception of RAs' alcohol use, along with the perceptions of the drinking of friends and general students, was significantly related to the students' personal quantity and frequency of drinking.

4.1 Discussion

This study is, to our knowledge, the first multi-site examination of the perceptions and attitudes that resident assistants and other students have of each other related to alcohol use. The findings indicate a consistent pattern of students overestimating the quantity and frequency of alcohol use by friends, general students, and resident assistants. While RA staff overestimated the quantity of alcohol consumed by other resident assistants, they were accurate in their perceptions of RA frequency of use. These findings are consistent with the TSNB, which proposes that perceived norms derive from the salience of the observed behaviors (see Rimal, Lapinski, Cook, & Real, 2005). Specifically, heavy drinking by college students tends to be more noticeable than light drinking or abstinence (Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). As a result, students tend to perceive other students as drinking more and being more accepting of heavy drinking than they actually are. It appears that this same dynamic is also evident in RAs, in regards to the quantity of use. This makes sense, as quantity would be linked to drunken behavior more than frequency of drinking. Finally, the Poisson regressions indicating that the student perception of others' drinking, be it friends, general students or RAs, was significantly associated with personal alcohol use highlighted the influence of perceived norms on behavior.

The influence of the perceived norms of RAs has considerable implications for the role of resident advisors in campus alcohol prevention and intervention efforts. As role models, RAs are generally close in age to the students they are responsible for, and ideally are respected by peers and administrators alike. Therefore, resident assistants have the unique opportunity to model appropriate and responsible behaviors for the students, especially regarding alcohol use. Such programming is delivered in collaboration with other peer leaders specializing in health education could assist in developing a holistic relationship between resident assistants and students. In this way, the RAs can move away from being solely regarded as policy enforcers and be perceived more as fellow students with supervisory responsibilities.

The results of this study should be considered in the context of several limitations. First, data was collected at four colleges in the Northeastern US, making it unknown whether these results are applicable to other campuses or students. Second, although the response rate was good for survey studies of this type, there may have been a recruitment bias (e.g., heavier drinkers chose not to participate). Third, all data was collected by self report. Although there is no evidence that college students intentionally under-report drinking (Borsari & Muellerleile, 2009), confidence in the accuracy of the data would be enhanced by collateral information or other verification procedures.

Despite these limitations, this study suggests promising directions for research. First, the influence of RAs could be clarified through longitudinal research measuring changes in perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported drinking between resident assistants and the specific students they are responsible for. Second, research investigating RA's socialization patterns, peer-networks, motivation for serving as student leaders, and the positive and negative outcomes they experience would enhance our understanding of residential peer culture systems and peer interactions (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

6.1 Conclusion

In sum, significant differences exist between general students and resident assistants related to their frequency and quantity of alcohol use as well as binge-drinking levels. Specifically, students perceived that resident assistants consumed alcohol less frequently and in smaller quantities than other students, and that these perceptions were uniquely related to personal alcohol use. This suggests that RAs can be utilized as influential models that may influence the culture of heavy drinking on college campuses.

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Table 1
Self-other Comparisons for Resident Assistants and Students

Variable	Self Report Mean, (SD)	Perceptions of RAs Mean, (SD)	Perceptions of Students Mean, (SD)
<u>RA's</u>			
How much do you drink (Quantity)	3.36 (2.75) ^{a, c, g}	4.62 (3.08) ^g	5.88 (2.54) ^b
How often do you drink (Frequency)	40.67 (47.56) ^{d, h, n}	50.22 (58.17) ^h	121.06 (83.01) ^m
Binge Drinking	0.93 (1.412) ^e	NA	NA
Attitudes Towards Drinking	2.55 (0.769) ^k	NA	3.62 (1.223) ^f
<u>Students</u>			
How much do you drink (Quantity)	5.67 (4.021) ^{b, c}	5.12 (3.328) ^{a, i}	6.96 (2.88) ⁱ
How often do you drink (Frequency)	82.47 (77.52) ^{d, n}	61.70 (67.01) ^{j, n}	133.53 (70.32) ^j
Binge Drinking	2.58 (2.788) ^e	NA	NA
Attitudes Towards Drinking	3.08 (0.969) ^{f, k}	NA	3.72 (.903)

Note: Mann-Whitney U tests for independent samples, and Wilcoxon Sign Rank Test for paired samples, were conducted between variables with the same superscript. *Quantity* was measured on a 0 – 15+ scale of drinks; *Frequency* answer variables were weighted to reflect yearly frequency of alcohol use: No alcohol use = 0, 1-2 times per year = 1.5, Six times per year = 6, once a month = 12, twice a month = 24, once a week = 52, three times a week = 156, five times a week = 260, every day = 360. *Binge drinking* was measured on a 0 – 14+ scale within a two week period. Attitudes toward drinking was measured on a five point continuum of attitudes scale with the following options: 1= drinking is never a good thing to do; 2= drinking is alright, but a person should not get drunk; 3=occasionally getting drunk is okay as long as it doesn't interfere with academics or other responsibilities; 4= occasionally getting drunk is okay even if it does interfere with academics or responsibilities; 5= frequently getting drunk is okay if that's what the individual wants to do. NA = Not assessed

Table 2
Models predicting student self-reported alcohol quantity and frequency of alcohol use

Variables	Quantity				Frequency			
	Estimate (β)	Exp (β)	Standard Error	Chi-Square (χ^2)	Estimate (β)	Exp (β)	Standard Error	Chi-Square (χ^2)
Intercept	0.9876	2.6848	0.0573	296.61**	3.7634	43.0947	0.0177	45165.3**
White	0.1879	1.2067	0.0467	16.17**	0.1949	1.2152	0.0122	253.84**
Male	0.3094	1.3626	0.0344	80.78**	0.1378	1.1477	0.0088	246.15**
Perceptions of General Student Drinking	0.1252	1.1334	0.0056	505.27**	0.0034	1.0034	0.0001	3312.49**
Intercept	0.6081	1.8369	0.0588	106.99**	3.2035	24.6185	0.0170	35493.7**
White	0.1103	1.1166	0.0467	5.58	0.2500	1.2840	0.0122	422.36**
Male	0.0182	1.0184	0.0368	0.24	0.0069	1.0069	0.0088	0.61
Perceptions of Friends' Drinking	0.1502	1.1621	0.0049	931.55**	0.0069	1.0069	0.0001	20508.5**
Intercept	1.4890	4.4327	0.0441	1141.38**	4.0990	60.280	0.0147	78030.9**
White	0.1908	1.2102	0.0468	16.65**	0.2241	1.2512	0.0122	336.50**
Male	0.2950	1.3431	0.0346	72.67**	0.0577	1.0594	0.0089	41.58**
Perceptions of Resident Assistant Drinking	0.0829	1.0864	0.0046	326.65**	0.0030	1.0030	0.0001	3434.50**

** *Note.* $p < .0001$