The DRAM, Vol. 9(2) – Drinking just to fit in? The effect of drinking norms and perceived social support on alcohol consumption in college students.

February 13, 2013

Alcohol norms are one of the strongest predictors of alcohol consumption: people who expect that others drink heavily tend to drink heavily themselves. Many factors can influence this relationship, including perceived social support. Research indicates that those who perceive low support from their social groups tend to be more greatly influenced what they think other people are doing, as they change their behavior as an attempt to 'fit in' (Cullum, O'Grady, & Tennen, 2011). Today's DRAM reviews a study that explores the relationship between *alcohol* norms, behavior, and perceived social support in college students. (Cullum, O'Grady, Sandoval, Armeli, & Tennen, 2013). The authors predicted that perceived social support would moderate the effect of alcohol norms on drinking behavior among college students.

Methods

- The sample consisted of 498 college students, primarily freshman and sophomores, recruited from introductory psychology classes for a larger study of health behaviors.
- Participants kept a daily online diary of their drinking behavior for 30 days. Researchers converted the data from the diary into two outcome measures.
    - Drinking frequency: the total number of days on which a participant drank, divided by 30 days.
    - Drinking quantity: the total number of drinks divided by the number of days the participant reported any drinking (i.e., drinks per drinking day).
- Participants also completed a survey assessing drinking norms and

perceived social support at the beginning of the study.

    - For drinking norms, participants answered one question about how frequently they expected college students of their gender consumed (*None, 1-3 drinks per month, 1-3 drinks per week, 1 drink per day, or More than 1 drink per day).*

- For perceived social support, participants completed the five-item Perceived Social Support from Friends Scale (Procidano & Heller, 1983).
    - The scale includes questions such as "*My friends give me the moral support I need"* answered on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*).
- Researchers then entered the data into a multiple regression model to determine how social support and alcohol norms related to drinking behavior.

Results

- Researchers found that drinking norms significantly predicted drinking frequency, $b = .04$, $SE = .01$, $p = .001$, and drinking quantity, $b = .33$, $SE = .16$, $p = .03$. Those reporting higher drinking norms also reported higher drinking frequency and quantity. Social support did not relate directly to either measure.
- There was a significant social support x drinking norm interaction in relation to both frequency and quantity. The Figure illustrates the nature of the interaction.
    - For both drinking measures, the behavior of participants who reported high social support did not vary by the norms they held; however, participants who reported low social support demonstrated much lighter drinking behavior if they held low norms and much heavier drinking behavior if they held high norms.

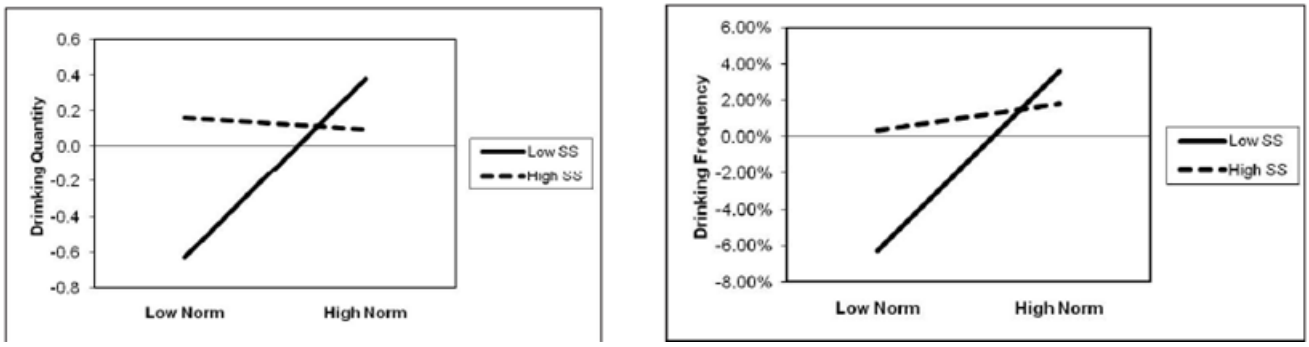

Figure. Drinking quantity and frequency as a function of perceived drinking norms and social support. SS = social support. (Reprinted with permission from Cullum et al., 2013). Note: The Y axis represents the number of drinks difference from the sample average for drinking quantity, and the percent difference from the sample average for drinking frequency. Click image to enlarge.

Limitations

- The study relies entirely on self-report data.
- The drinking norm question was very vague, asking about college students in general. The results might be different if researchers used a more targeted version of the question, asking about students at a specific school or specific class year.
- We cannot conclude causality based on the results of this study. While there might be a relationship between norms, social support and drinking behavior, we cannot be sure which variables influence which. For example, those with limited social support and low norms might have fewer friends and thus fewer opportunities for drinking.

Conclusions

The results of this study show that drinking norms are significantly associated with drinking behavior, particularly for college students with low social support. Those with low social support and high drinking norms showed on average the highest drinking behavior in the sample. These findings provide greater insight into the complicated world of social drinking in colleges and the motivations behind drinking. Studies like these might eventually be used by colleges to create interventions that identify and target students most at risk for drinking problems—specifically, those who both feel isolated and believe others are drinking heavily.

-Daniel Tao

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

References

Cullum, J., O'Grady, M., Sandoval, P., Armeli, S., Tennen, H. (2013). Ignoring norms with a little help from my friends: Social support reduces normative influence on drinking behavior. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *32*(1), 17-33.

Cullum, J., O'Grady, M., Tennen, H. (2011). Affiliation goals and health behaviors. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 5*, 694-705.

Procidano, M.E., Heller, K. (1983). Measures of perceived social support from friends and from family: Three validation studies. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *11,* 1-24.