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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Parent–student communication regarding alcohol use: an examination of tacit approval

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### Abstract

**Background:** First-year college students appear to be at particular risk for experiencing negative alcohol-related consequences. This risk has fostered a need to identify malleable factors associated with first-year student alcohol consumption. Studies have shown significant positive associations between perceived parental approval of drinking and alcohol use and associated consequences. However, researchers have not yet identified the exact mechanism responsible for this relationship.

**Objectives:** This study examined a potential vehicle by which parents may communicate approval of drinking to their college aged children. Specifically, we tested if less parent communication about alcohol use would be perceived as tacit approval on the part of first-year college students.

**Methods:** Two hundred seventy-nine first-year undergraduate students age 18–20 answered online surveys of perceived parental approval of drinking, negative alcohol-related consequences, perceived parental knowledge, and parent–student communication regarding alcohol use.

**Results:** Contrary to hypothesis, our findings indicate the amount of parent–student communication regarding alcohol use did not predict perceived parental approval of drinking in first-year students, after controlling for the influence of gender, perceived parental knowledge, and negative consequences of alcohol use.

**Conclusions:** Results suggest that first-year college students may not interpret less parent–student communication regarding alcohol as tacit approval of drinking.

### Keywords

Alcohol use, parental approval of drinking, predictive validity, tacit approval

### History

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### Introduction

Alcohol misuse in the U.S. represents a staggering public health problem, with an average of 79 000 lives lost each year related to excessive alcohol consumption (NIAAA, 2000; Bouchery et al., 2011). Despite heavy drinking having been recognized as a major public health concern for many years, recent nationwide surveys indicate minimal progress has been made (Hingson et al., 2009). This is evidenced by the considerable rise in economic costs attributed to excessive drinking, with the estimated annual cost of 184.6 billion dollars in 1998 (NIAAA, 2000) ballooning to 223.5 billion in 2006 (Bouchery et al., 2011). According to these reports, a large part of these economic costs can be attributed to underage binge drinking (Bouchery et al., 2011). Interestingly, underage binge drinking appears to increase dramatically from 24.6% at ages 16–17 to 48.9% at ages 18–20. Within this high-risk age group, full-time college students seem to be a particular risk as they show

substantially higher rates of binge drinking than their same aged peers not enrolled full-time (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2011). Taken together, this suggests that the initiation of college enrollment between the ages 18 and 20 corresponds to a major increase in risky alcohol involvement, specifically increase in binge drinking.

Binge drinking during early college years has long been considered a rite of passage in the United States. Annually more than 3 million first-year students enroll in colleges all across the country (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010), ready to embark on a critical transitional period in their life (Steinberg, 2011). A key part of this transition is learning how to navigate the “culture of drinking” that appears to be entrenched at every level of the collegiate experience (NIAAA, 2002, 2007). Exposure to this novel environment is widely regarded as an important risk factor for experiencing alcohol-related problems by first-year students (NIAAA, 2002). Research indicates that first-year students drink more, engage in more frequent binge drinking episodes (Turrissi et al., 2000b), and are at increased risk for being arrested for alcohol-related infractions (Thompson et al., 2006). Furthermore, alcohol consumption is significantly

associated with college dropout, with the highest attrition rate coming between the end of the first and beginning of second years (Martinez et al., 2008). Thus, all things considered, first-year students seem to be particularly vulnerable for negative alcohol-related consequences. These vulnerabilities have fostered a need to identify risk and protective factors associated with first-year students' alcohol consumption, in an effort to diminish both the individual and societal impact of these behaviors.

It is reasonable to believe that first-year students enter college with varying beliefs about the role that alcohol should play in everyday college life. To some it undoubtedly holds a prominent place, while to others it may bear little significance. Those who feel alcohol consumption is sanctioned, embraced, even a celebrated part of the collegiate experience, may be at greatest risk for the development of problematic drinking patterns and increased negative alcohol-related consequences (Neighbors et al., 2007). In support of this, research has shown that perceived approval of one's drinking is one of the best predictors of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems in young adult college students (Larimer et al., 2004; Neighbors et al., 2008). Studies examining perceived approval of drinking have identified two primary sources of perceived approval for college student drinking, their peers (Lewis et al., 2010) and their parents (Boyle & Boekeloo, 2006). While perceived peer approval appears to be the most robust predictor of problematic drinking in college students between the two (Collins & Spelman, 2013; LaBrie et al., 2010; Neighbors et al., 2007), it still remains a relatively elusive mechanism to design interventions around (Mollen et al., 2013; Prentice, 2008). However, perceived parental approval appears to be not only a significant predictor of problematic alcohol consumption and associated problems in college students (Abar et al., 2014; Turrisi et al., 2013a), but a more easily accessible and cost effective target for interventions (LaBrie & Cail, 2011; LaBrie et al., 2011). However, despite the growing body of literature investigating the efficacy of parent-based interventions, studies have found inconsistent results (Fernandez et al., 2011; Ichiyama et al., 2009; Turrisi et al., 2009, 2013b; Wood et al., 2010). Perhaps further understanding of how parents communicate approval of alcohol use to their college students, and why this approval is associated with drinking outcomes could, in turn, lead to the development of stronger parent-based interventions.

One mechanism by which parental approval of drinking could be conveyed is by neglecting to discuss alcohol-related topics during communication between the parent and student. That is, this less communication regarding alcohol consumption could lead to the perception of approval on the part of the student, tacitly. Tacit approval is a benign form of approval that is not expressed in words. This concept is based on the tendency of people to assume lack of a response to an action is, in turn, a form of implied approval of that action. Simply put, when parents fail to communicate their attitudes regarding the alcohol use of their college-aged children, those students may interpret this lack of communication as acceptance of their alcohol use (i.e., tacit approval). Importantly, this potential mechanism has yet to be investigated and its inclusion may offer new insight into how students form their

normative perceptions about alcohol use. This is especially true given parent–student communication is considered an important factor delaying the onset and course of problematic alcohol use, yet, the strength and direction of this association has varied widely in prior research (Turrisi et al., 2007, 2000b). The current study investigated whether the amount of communication regarding alcohol use between college students and their parents is inversely related to perceived parental approval of drinking, after controlling for other important covariates shown to be associated with parental approval of alcohol use (Borsari et al., 2007; Boyle & Boekeloo, 2006; Fairlie et al., 2012b; LaBrie et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2004).

## Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that less parent–student communication regarding alcohol use would predict levels of perceived parent approval of drinking. More specifically, parent–student communication regarding alcohol use was hypothesized to be negatively associated with perceived parent approval of drinking, after controlling for the influence of gender, perceived parental knowledge, and negative consequences of alcohol use.

## Method

### Participants

The respondents were 279 first-year undergraduate students (71.7% female) between the ages of 18 and 20 ( $M = 18.27$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ). Ninety percent of respondents were White ( $n = 251$ ), 0.7% were Black or African American ( $n = 2$ ), 1.1% were Asian ( $n = 3$ ), 2.2% were Native American or Alaskan Native ( $n = 6$ ), 4.7% were Multiracial ( $n = 13$ ), and 0.7% were of other races or did not respond ( $n = 2$ ). Eight participants (2.9% of the sample) identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Regarding residence, 0.4% of the sample reported living in Greek housing ( $n = 1$ ), 97.5% reported living in residence halls ( $n = 272$ ), 1.1% reported living off campus without parents ( $n = 3$ ), and 1.1% ( $n = 3$ ) reported living off campus with parents. These data are part of a larger ongoing study examining parental influence on college student alcohol use.

## Measures

### Demographic information

Participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, residence, and racial background.

### Perceived parental approval of drinking

Attitudes toward drinking behaviors were assessed using the Modified Injunctive Norms Questionnaire (Baer, 1994). Adding one item that assessed less severe injunctive drinking norms modified this measure (Messler et al., 2014). Participants reported the extent to which they believe their parents would respond if they knew “you drank alcohol occasionally”; “you drank alcohol every weekend”; “you drank alcohol daily”; “you drove a car after drinking alcohol”; and “you drank enough alcohol to pass out.”

Response options were based on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*strong disapproval*) to 7 (*strong approval*). A composite score for each reference group was used in the analysis. Cronbach's alpha was 0.73.

### Negative consequences of alcohol use

Alcohol-related problems in the past 90 days were assessed with the Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (YAACQ; Read et al., 2006), a 48-item self-report questionnaire assessing drinking behaviors and consequences. These consequences include: social-interpersonal consequences, impaired control, self-perception, self-care, risk behaviors, academic/occupational consequences, physical dependence, and blackout drinking. The YAACQ uses dichotomous (Yes/No) response options, emphasizing problem experiences that often occur either during or after alcohol consumption. The YAACQ has demonstrated excellent test-retest reliability and convergent validity with alcohol use and other measures of alcohol problems (Read et al., 2006, 2007). Cronbach's alpha was 0.94.

### Perceived parental knowledge

Parental knowledge was assessed with a modified version of the 9-item Strictness/Supervision Scale (Steinberg et al., 1992), whereby only items that appeared most relevant to older adolescents were selected (Fairlie et al., 2012b; Varvil-Weld et al., 2012). Four items asked participants to report the degree to which their parents actually know (knowledge) "where you go at night"; "what you do with your free time"; where you are most afternoons after school"; and "about your drinking." Response options were based on a three-point scale ranging from 1 (*don't know*) to 3 (*know a lot*). A composite score was used in the analysis. Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.

### Parent-student communication regarding alcohol use

Alcohol based parent-student communication was assessed using a modified version of the Alcohol Based Parent-Teen Communication Scale (Turrissi et al., 2000a), whereby three items were added to increase reliability (Boyle & Boekeloo, 2009). This 33-item scale assessed alcohol-related communication topics that parents may have discussed with their college student children in the past 90 days. Example items of the scale include: "In the past 90 days, my parent(s) and I have discussed the ways that alcohol can impair your judgment"; and "In the past 90 days, my parent(s) and I have discussed what the punishment would be if you were caught drinking." Response options were based on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Internal consistency of the total score is  $\alpha = 0.97$  (Boyle & Boekeloo, 2009). A composite score was used in the analysis. Cronbach's alpha was 0.98.

### Procedure

The local institutional review board approved all study procedures in advance. Participants were recruited online through the university research pool. The study was conducted online during the fall semester of 2013. Computerized

and paper-and-pencil versions of self-report measures have been shown to produce equivalent scores and are highly correlated (Gwaltney et al., 2008). However, there are several key advantages to computerized versions, including a reduction in missing data by requiring answers to items before allowing participants to move on to the next item as well as error associated with data entry can be reduced as no manual data entry is required (Gwaltney et al., 2008). Eligibility criteria included: (a) being currently enrolled as a first-year college student and (b) being between the ages 18 and 20 years. Participants provided informed consent and received course credit for participation.

## Results

### Descriptive analysis

Composite scores for perceived parental approval of drinking ranged from 5 to 29 ( $M = 8.78$ ,  $SD = 3.61$ ). Participants reported experiencing an average of 7.20 ( $SD = 7.99$ ) alcohol-related problems over the past 90 days. Composite scores for perceived parental knowledge ranged from 4 to 12 ( $M = 8.51$ ,  $SD = 2.58$ ). Composite scores for parent-student communication regarding alcohol use ranged from 33 to 165 ( $M = 63.57$ ,  $SD = 34.03$ ). Correlation coefficients were computed among gender, perceived parental approval of drinking, negative consequences of alcohol use, perceived parental knowledge, and parent-student communication regarding alcohol use (Table 1).

### Hypothesis

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of parent-student communication regarding alcohol use to predict levels of perceived parent approval of drinking, after controlling for the influence of gender, perceived parental knowledge, and negative consequences of alcohol use. In Step 1, perceived parental approval was regressed on gender, perceived parental knowledge, and negative consequences of alcohol use, explaining 6.0% of the variance. Gender, perceived parental knowledge, negative consequences of alcohol use, and parent-student communication regarding alcohol use were entered in Step 2. The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 6.1%,  $F(4, 274) = 4.42$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . In the final model, negative consequences of alcohol use ( $\beta = 0.256$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) was the only significant predictor of perceived parental approval of drinking. Thus, our hypothesis that parent-student communication regarding alcohol use would predict levels of perceived parent approval of drinking, after controlling for the influence of gender, perceived

Table 1. Correlations between variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	–	0.05	0.00	0.12*	0.03
2. Perceived Parental Approval		–	0.23**	0.00	0.00
3. Negative Consequences of Alcohol Use			–	–0.32**	0.06
4. Perceived Parental Knowledge				–	0.14*
5. Parent-student Communication					–

For gender, men = 1 and women = 2,  $N = 279$ , \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ .

Table 2. Regression analysis: parent–student communication regarding alcohol use predicting perceived parental approval of drinking.

Variable	B	SEB	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Step 1					0.060
Gender	0.328	0.472	0.041	0.487	
Perceived parental knowledge	0.111	0.087	0.079	0.204	
Negative consequences of alcohol use	0.114	0.028	0.253	0.000	
Step 2					0.061
Gender	0.330	0.472	0.041	0.485	
Perceived parental knowledge	0.118	0.089	0.085	0.183	
Negative consequences of alcohol use	0.116	0.028	0.256	0.000	
Communication regarding alcohol use	−0.003	0.006	−0.029	0.630	

*N* = 279, Step 1  $F(3, 275) = 5.83, p = 0.001, R^2 = 0.06$ ; Step 2  $\Delta R^2 = 0.00, \Delta F(1, 274) = 0.23, p = 0.63$ ; Full model  $F(4, 274) = 4.42, p = 0.002, R^2 = 0.06$

parental knowledge, and negative consequences of alcohol use, was not supported (Table 2).

## Discussion

The current study examined a potential vehicle by which parents may communicate approval of drinking to their college aged children. More specifically, we tested if a less parent communication about alcohol use would be perceived as tacit approval on the part of the student. As such, it was hypothesized that parent–student communication regarding alcohol use would be inversely related to perceived parental approval of drinking, after controlling for the influence of gender, perceived parental knowledge, and negative consequences of alcohol use. Our regression analysis did not provide support for this hypothesis.

Nonetheless, the observed lack of association between parent–student communication regarding alcohol use and perceived parental approval of drinking may shed light on how perceptions of parental approval of drinking are formed among college students. Parents may communicate attitudes regarding alcohol use through several modes (Boyle & Boekeloo, 2006). Perhaps it is parents' nonverbal communications of attitudes regarding alcohol use that are of the greatest magnitude in shaping college students' perceptions of parental attitudes. Future studies should address various aspects of alcohol-specific parent communication. At the least, our findings suggest that for college populations, the amount of verbal communication with parents regarding alcohol use is not related to perceived parental approval of drinking.

Although parent–student communication regarding alcohol use does not appear to be a salient factor in college student alcohol problems based on our study, we should note that the tone of these conversations is unknown. It may be the case that when drinking related topics are discussed, parents are giving admonitions, which emerging adults may find difficult to follow as they flex their independence. Another complication is that some parents may speak to their children about negative consequences of alcohol use in ways that convey these experiences as entertaining, thus confounding results. Permissive messages are a common type of alcohol-specific parent communication in late adolescence (Miller-Day, 2008; Reimuller et al., 2011).

Regardless, parent–student communication regarding alcohol use is a common component to parent-based interventions. Perhaps this communication would carry more weight for parents incorporating principles and techniques drawn from existing models of psychotherapy and behavior change theory. Furthermore, parental efforts to change college student behaviors are more likely to be effective when accompanied by an understanding of the contexts in which those behaviors occur (Fairlie et al., 2012a, 2012b). Additionally, item-level correlation is warranted to explore how amount of communication regarding specific topics (e.g. “the dangers of drinking and driving”) relate to both specific consequences (e.g. “I have driven a car when I knew I had too much to drink to drive safely”) and perceived parental approval of drinking.

A limitation of the current study is that respondents were mostly White, female college students. Generalizations to other populations should be made with caution. The cross-section design of this study represents another limitation. Future research should investigate the relationship between perceived parental approval of drinking, negative consequences of alcohol use, perceived parental knowledge, and parent–student communication regarding alcohol use longitudinally with diverse samples.

## Conclusion

The goal of this study was to investigate whether parent–student communication regarding alcohol use is inversely related to perceived parental approval of drinking. Our study demonstrated that amount of parent–student communication regarding alcohol use is not associated with perceived parental approval of drinking, after controlling for the influence of gender, perceived parental knowledge, and negative consequences of alcohol use. In other words, this suggests that in the context of alcohol use, college students do not interpret less parent–student communication regarding alcohol as tacit approval of drinking. Future research should explore how college student perceptions of parental approval of drinking are formed.

## Declaration of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official views or policy of the Department of Defense, or its Components.

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