College students' expectations of the results of drinking

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COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS OF THE RESULTS OF DRINKING

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SUMMARY

Social drinkers, when drinking, are expected to feel better and to be kinder, more fun to be with and more energetic and active than they would be if they were not drinking; inebriated alcoholics are expected to be meaner, less fun to be with and more lethargic than they would be if they were not inebriated.

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-accepted principle in social psychology (e.g., 1,2,3) that attitudes and expectations help to determine behavior. Research on alcoholism (e.g., 4,5,6) shares this view, but relatively little research has been done on stereotypic expectations of the effects of drinking on drinkers' feelings and behavior. A previous study (7) found that elementary-school children had stereotypic expectations of changes in adults' behavior and feelings after drinking, the children expecting strong differences in the effects on social drinkers and on alcoholics. The present study extends this research to examine whether a sample of college students would attribute different effects to social drinkers and to alcoholics.

METHOD
The sample of 100 college students enrolled in 2 classes at the Rochester Institute of Technology included 48 men and 20 women who were first-year students, their mean (+SD) age being 18.6 + 1.3 years, and 24 men and 8 women who were fourth-year students, their mean age being 23.2 + 2.1 years. The students in general were from a lower-middle-class to middle-class background.

At the beginning of the second meeting of the class, each student was asked to fill out a booklet consisting of a sheet of instructions and 4 randomly ordered target sheets. Each target sheet was headed by a sentence stem varying one of these conditions: "A normal man [woman] when he [she] has a few drinks..." being social drinker targets, or "A man [woman] who is an alcoholic when he [she] is drunk..." being alcoholic targets.

Under each stem were 11 sets designed to mark off 5 equal intervals between 2 polar adjectives: kind-mean, relaxed-tense, brave-afraid, quiet-loud, strong-weak, active-passive, more fun to be with-less fun to be with, peaceful-aggressive, feel better-feel worse, energetic-lethargic, and sloppy-neat. Respondents were asked to compare the feelings or behavior of the targets in the listed condition with the way in which the target would usually or normally feel. The adjectival sets were chosen to be representative of the 3 dimensions (evaluation, potency and activity) of the semantic differential (8).

**Statistical Analysis**

Two-tailed t-tests compared respondents grouped by sex and by age or year in college to determine whether these differences had to be maintained in data analysis. Although the data are ordinal by nature, extensive research (e.g., 8-10) has shown that the semantic differential intervals are equal enough to be analyzed by such parametric measures as the t-test. Since none of these comparisons reached significance (p<.01), subjects were pooled without regard to these variables.

"Stereotyping."

The group's response to a set was considered to be stereotyped if its mean rating of an adjectival set excluded the dimension midpoint from the 99% confidence limits of the distribution. A mean rating
excluding the "real limits" of the midpoint (2.5-3.5) from the 99th confidence limits was considered an "extreme stereotype."

RESULTS

Table 1 lists the mean and standard error for each dimension, the stereotyped dimensions being listed for appropriate targets.

Five significant (p<.01) differences were found between conditions. After drinking, social drinkers were expected to be kinder, more fun to be with, to feel better, and to be more energetic and active than they usually are, whereas inebriated alcoholics were expected to be meaner, less fun to be with, more lethargic (if they were men) and neither to feel better nor be more active than usual. Inebriated alcoholics were expected to be significantly (p<.01) more aggressive, less relaxed and sloppier than were social drinkers who had been drinking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALE SOCIAL DRINKERS</th>
<th>FEMALE SOCIAL DRINKERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kind (2.62 + 0.08)*</td>
<td>Kind (2.72 + 0.07)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More fun (2.48 + 0.09)*</td>
<td>More fun (2.38 + 0.08)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic (2.61 + 0.09)*</td>
<td>Energetic (2.43 + 0.09)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels better (2.20 + 0.07)**</td>
<td>Feels better (2.17 + 0.07)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active (2.50 + 0.09)*</td>
<td>Active (2.47 + 0.10)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive (3.37 + 0.09)*</td>
<td>Aggressive (3.15 + 0.08) ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong (2.30 + 0.08)*</td>
<td>Strong (2.65 + 0.08)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loud (3.80 + 0.06)**</td>
<td>Loud (3.83 + 0.09)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed (1.91 + 0.06)**</td>
<td>Relaxed (1.86 + 0.07)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brave (2.04 + 0.06)**</td>
<td>Brave (2.09 + 0.07)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sloppy (2.26 + 0.06)**</td>
<td>Sloppy (2.31 + 0.07)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALE ALCOHOLICS</th>
<th>FEMALE ALCOHOLICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean (3.69 + 0.11)*</td>
<td>Mean (3.48 + 0.10)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less fun (4.08 + 0.11)*</td>
<td>Less fun (3.69 + 0.13)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethargic (3.44 + 0.12)*</td>
<td>Lethargic (3.13 + 0.12) ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels better (2.68 + 0.13)ns</td>
<td>Feels better (2.67 + 0.13)ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive (3.17 + 0.13) ns</td>
<td>Passive (2.98 + 0.13) ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aggressive (3.77 + 0.10)**  Aggressive (3.42 + 0.11)*  
Strong (2.42 + 0.12)*  Strong (2.83 + 0.11) ns  
Loud (4.06 + 0.11)**  Loud (3.65 + 0.13)*  
Relaxed (2.54 + 0.14)*  Relaxed (2.33 + 0.12)*  
Brave (2.08 + 0.07)*  Brave (2.21 + 0.10)**  
Sloppy (1.58 + 0.07)**  Sloppy (1.81 + 0.08)**

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ns = midpoint included within 99% Confidence limits

* = Stereotype: Midpoint outside the 99% Confidence int

** = Extreme stereotype: Real limits of midpoint out of 99% Conf int

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**DISCUSSION**

As in the elementary school children studied previously (7), college students' expectations of the effects of alcohol did not differ significantly according to the respondents' sex or age. Men and women shared the same stereotypes or lack of them (1), as did first-year and fourth-year students. Especially noteworthy was the lack of interaction effects. For example, women respondents did not have more negative nor more extreme expectations for women targets than did the men respondents. This finding may reflect a narrowing of differences in societal inhibitions of men's and women's drinking which has been occurring in our culture over the past 30 years.

A similar explanation may account for the few differences expected in men and women social drinkers' behavior and feelings. The two significant differences (men being expected to be more aggressive and to feel stronger after social drinking) would seem to reflect current sex-role expectations rather than any specific effect attributed to drinking. Respondents expected differences, however, between inebriated men and women alcoholics. Compared with women alcoholics, men alcoholics were expected to be more aggressive, louder, less fun to be with, sloppier and to feel more lethargic and, paradoxically, stronger. This result may be attributable to the respondents' having a clearer image of male alcoholics than of female alcoholics. While for male alcoholics only two sets were not stereotyped and four were extreme stereotypes, for female alcoholics four sets were not stereotyped and only two were extreme
stereotypes, indicating much greater agreement as to the image of the men than of women alcoholics.

The group's consensus in all four target conditions, however, is impressive. The vast majority of the students at the Rochester Institute of Technology drink alcohol or have seen it drunk at parties (11), and it is clear that alcohol has different effects on different people (12). That students still hold such definite ideas of the effects of alcohol on social drinkers and on alcoholics shows how powerful these images are.

These findings suggest a need for caution in investigating the effects of alcohol on personality and behavior. McClelland et al. (13), for example, reported that they found that social drinking produced images of "socialized power"—pleasant, kind, friendly feelings—in their subjects, and that increased drinking produced images of "personalized power"—aggressive, selfish, unfriendly feelings. The close parallel between their findings and the expectations of these effects reported in the present study suggest that their results may be partially attributable to the "expectancy effect" (1,2) rather than to the alcohol their subjects had consumed.

Several recent studies (14,15) have found that expectations of tension reduction and of sexual arousal due to drinking will bring about effects not predictable from known pharmacological effects of alcohol. The present study, replicating an earlier study of elementary school children, found that a sample of college students had well-defined expectations of the results of drinking. Researchers should carefully ascertain whether such stereotypical expectations, rather than alcohol, may explain variations in subjects' reactions to alcohol.

REFERENCES