# Alcohol Primes, Expectancies, and the Working Self-Concept

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## Abstract

Previous research has shown that alcohol consumption can lead to momentary changes in the self-concept (e.g., Steele & Josephs, 1990). In two studies (n = 150), we examined whether the implicit activation of alcohol expectancies (i.e., sociability-related expectancies) would also lead to changes in self-perception. To test this idea, participants first completed a measure of sociability-related alcohol expectancies. In a subsequent laboratory session, participants were exposed to either alcohol-related primes (i.e., pictures or words associated with alcohol) or neutral primes. After the priming task, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated self-concept survey that contained words related to sociability (e.g., "outgoing") and non-sociability related words (e.g., "clever"). For both studies, results revealed that sociability-related alcohol expectancies were positively associated with sociability-related self-concept ratings for participants exposed to alcohol primes, but not for participants exposed to the neutral primes. Implications for the role implicit self-concept activation may have on drinking behaviors are discussed.

## Keywords

Self-Concept; Identity; Alcohol Expectancies; Alcohol Primes; Alcohol use

According to social cognitive researchers, the *self-concept* may be conceptualized as a vast, multifaceted repository of self-relevant information, including self-characterizations, episodic memories, and personal goals (Oyserman, 2001). Research has shown that aspects of the self-concept can predict normal and heavy drinking behaviors (e.g., Gerrard et al., 2002; Palfai, 2006; Quinlan, Jaccard, & Blanton, 2006). More specifically, both the valence (Corte & Zucker, 2008; Aloise-Young, Hennigan, Leong, 2001) and the contents of one's self-concept (e.g., Chassin, Tetzloff, & Hershey, 1985) have been shown to predict alcohol

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use. For example, possessing self-schemas that are similar to one's schema for the prototypical drinker predicts greater alcohol use (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995). Importantly, the association between the self-concept and alcohol use has been shown to be bidirectional. The self-concept may not only serve as a motivating force influencing alcohol consumption, but acute alcohol consumption can also influence how the individual perceives him or herself (e.g., Steele & Josephs, 1990). Although research has shown that alcohol consumption can influence self-concept ratings, the role of alcohol expectancies in shaping momentary self-perceptions is unclear. The present studies tested this possibility by examining whether the activation of alcohol expectancies would promote self-conceptions consistent with those expectations.

Because of its sheer volume, only a small subset of knowledge about the self, termed the "working self-concept", can be cognitively activated at any point in time (Markus & Kunda, 1986). As a result, individuals' views of themselves are subject to cross-situational variation. To illustrate, while there are idiographic differences in sociability (Costa & McCrae, 1992), most individuals presumably harbor memories of themselves acting in an outgoing manner. If these memories were momentarily brought to mind, individuals are likely to view themselves as somewhat more extroverted.

A number of contextual variables influence the contents of the working self-concept, thereby altering individuals' self-characterizations. For instance, when asked if they possess certain traits (e.g., "Do you feel comfortable with people?"), individuals tend to selectively search memory for information that would provide an affirmative answer (e.g., recollections of times spent with friends), momentarily increasing the likelihood that they will view themselves as possessing the trait (e.g., extroverted) (e.g., Jones, Berglas, Rhodewalt, & Skelton, 1981). Even the presentation of simple trait labels (e.g., "outgoing" vs. "shy") may suffice to prime trait-related self-knowledge. Such momentary changes in the working self-concept can have important consequences for behavior. For example, Comer and Laird (1975) demonstrated that participants induced to perceive themselves as "brave" were more likely to participate in an aversive follow up task that involved receiving electric shocks. Similarly, Fazio, Effrein, & Falender (1981) showed that situational cues aimed to prime extraversion, increased participants self-rated extraversion scores, and, importantly, led participants to behave more extraverted on a subsequent task (see Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007, for a review).

Integrating these discoveries with research on the interface between implicit cognition and addictive substances (see Wiers & Stacy, 2006, for a review), the present studies examined whether exposure to rudimentary alcohol primes would influence the working self-concept. In past research, alcohol consumption has been shown to influence self-concept ratings. For example, consistent with the self-inflation component of their myopia model, Steele & Josephs' (1990) reported that alcohol consumption can lead to decreased discrepancy between one's ideal and actual self (but see Wolfe & Maisto, 2000). The present studies examined whether subtle primes associated with alcohol would also lead to changes in the working self-concept. We predicted that alcohol priming would lead individuals to characterize themselves as possessing traits associated with the expected behavioral effects of drinking.

Why should this be the case? According to information-processing models of alcohol use, alcohol expectancies constitute representations in long-term memory that may be activated in the presence of drinking-related cues (Goldman, 1999; Stacy, 1997). Presumably, expectancy representations primed by alcohol cues may then spread activation to associated self-knowledge, effectively altering the working self-concept (Collins & Loftus, 1975). To illustrate, exposure to alcohol-related stimuli may prime the expectancy that alcohol increases sociability (see Krank et al., 2005). This may in turn activate sociability-related episodic memories and/or declarative memories, thereby momentarily leading individuals to view themselves as more extroverted.

In two studies, participants' alcohol expectancies regarding sociability and aggression were assessed in a preliminary session. In a subsequent session, participants were randomly assigned to receive either alcohol primes or control primes. Each study used a unique priming procedure (photos or words associated with alcohol) in order to demonstrate converging support for our predicted effects. After the priming task, participants were asked to rate themselves on a number of traits. Some of these traits (e.g., "outgoing") were related to sociability whereas others were not (e.g., "clever"). In line with our theoretical assumptions, we predicted that exposure to alcohol primes would heighten sociability-related self-ratings for individuals with strong sociability-related alcohol expectancies.

## Method

### Participants

Study 1 included 72 students (43 women). Study 2 included 78 students (51 women). [1] All participants were enrolled in an introductory psychology course and completed the studies for partial course credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old ($M = 18.88$, $SD = .92$). Two participants who reported some suspicion about the purpose of the studies were excluded from the analyses.

### Materials

**Expectancy Assessment**—Participants completed 5 items from the brief version of the Comprehensive Effects of Alcohol Questionnaire (B-CEOA; see Ham, Stewart, Norton, & Hope, 2005). [2] Two items assessed sociability-related expectancies including "If I were under the influence of alcohol I would be sociable" and "If I were under the influence of alcohol it would be easier to talk to people" ($M = 4.25$; $SD = .64$; $a = .65$, for Study 1; $M = 4.18$; $SD = .69$; $a = .72$, for Study 2). Three items assessed risk and aggression expectancies including "If I were under the influence of alcohol I would be aggressive," "If I were under the influence of alcohol I would take risks," and "If I were under the influence of alcohol I would be loud, boisterous, and noisy" ($M = 3.29$; $SD = .86$; $a = .76$, for Study 1; $M = 3.01$; $SD = .85$; $a = .64$, for Study 2). Items were rated on a 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*) scale.

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[1] There were no differences between the two studies on any variable of interest (*p's* > .13).
[2] Because of limitation on the number of items we were allotted in the pre-test, we only administered the sociability and risk/aggression items from the B-CEOA.

**Experimental Manipulation (Study 1)**—For Study 1, a "Magazine Preference Task," adapted from Bartholow and Heinz (2006), served as the priming manipulation. Participants were presented with a series of photographs purportedly taken from advertisements and asked to make judgments regarding each ad (e.g., "Do you think the advertisement was effective based on this photograph?"). Participants were additionally instructed that the photographs would be randomly drawn from a number of distinct product categories (e.g., alcohol, furniture, etc.). For each category, participants viewed 5 photographs and made 5 ratings for each photograph. To bolster the cover story, participants first rated photographs related to two neutral filler categories (office products and fruits and vegetables). In the experimental condition, the third set included photographs of alcohol beverages (e.g., an image of a frosty beer mug). In the control condition, the third set included photographs of furniture (e.g., a table). All of the photographs were edited to ensure that their content was related only to the primed category.

**Experimental Manipulation (Study 2)**—For Study 2, a word-find puzzle task adapted from Bargh et al., (2001) served as the priming manipulation. Participants were instructed that the experimenters were refining a few "word-find" puzzles for future research and their task was simply to work on each puzzle for two minutes. Participants were further instructed that the words in each puzzle would be associated with a distinct category. Each puzzle consisted of a $12 \times 12$ matrix of letters and had 12 target words embedded in the matrix. A title associated with the type of words to be found was also displayed at the top of the screen. After viewing a sample puzzle (with correct words bolded inside the matrix), participants worked on two filler puzzles (containing types of dogs and state capitals). To bolster the cover story, participants rated each puzzle on various dimensions (e.g., "How difficult was the puzzle?"). In the experimental condition, the third puzzle was titled "The Liquor Store" and included target words such as "vodka," "whiskey," "beer," "tequila," "rum," "martini," and "cocktail." In the control condition, the third puzzle was titled "A Melody of Beverages" and included target words such as "lemonade," "milk," "seven-up," "gatorade," and "orange juice."

**Self-Concept Ratings Survey**—Participants rated themselves on 25 self-descriptors (e.g., "organized," "shallow"). All descriptors were displayed in random order and participants were asked to rate them on a 1 (*definitely does not describe me*) to 7 (*definitely does describe me*) scale. Four of the descriptors, "sociable," "outgoing," "friendly," and "welcoming," were related to sociability ($M = 5.58$; $SD = .75$; $\alpha = .79$, for Study 1; $M = 5.56$; $SD = .69$; $\alpha = .72$, for Study 2). In addition, 6 other positive descriptors that were not specifically related to sociability (e.g., "happy," "clever," "smart," "competent") were included to control for the possibility that priming would interact with sociability-related alcohol expectancies to predict general self-inflation (e.g., Steele & Josephs, 1990) as opposed to self-concept change specific to sociability ($M = 5.31$; $SD = .69$; $\alpha = .70$, for Study 1; $M = 5.23$; $SD = .66$; $\alpha = .71$, for Study 2).

**Alcohol use**—Participants completed a questionnaire ostensibly sponsored by "The Center for Research on Addictions." Two items embedded in this survey assessed typical alcohol use (taken from Smith, McCarthy, & Goldman, 1995). To examine typical frequency of

alcohol use, participants rated one item, "Which of the following best describes how often you drink alcohol," on a 1 ("I have never had a drink of alcohol") to 6 ("I drink alcohol almost daily") scale. ($M$ = 4.66; $SD$ = .79; for Study 1; $M$ = 4.47; $SD$ = .80; for Study 2). For typical quantity of alcohol use, participants rated one item, "Which of the following best describes how much alcohol you usually drink at one time" on a 1 ("I don't drink alcohol") to 5 ("I usually drink a lot of alcohol (more than 9 beers or drinks)") scale ($M$ = 3.75; $SD$ = .73; for Study 1; $M$ = 3.71; $SD$ = 1.02; for Study 2). Because these two items were highly correlated ($r's$ > .60), they were standardized and averaged to create an overall alcohol use variable.[3]

### Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, participants completed a mass pretest that included a variety of diverse measures (approximately 200 items). Embedded in the pretest were the 5 items from the B-CEOA. Approximately 1½ months later, participants completed a laboratory session. Upon arrival, participants were escorted to a visually isolated computer station. They were told that they would complete a few unrelated tasks sponsored by researchers from different areas of psychology. The first task constituted the experimental manipulation (i.e., the advertisement ratings task for Study 1, and the word-find task for Study 2). This was followed by the self-concept survey. Participants then completed a variety of filler questionnaires, followed by the survey assessing alcohol use. Finally, participants were probed for suspicion using a funneled debriefing procedure (see Bargh & Chartrand, 2000) and fully debriefed.

## Results

Correlations among all measures are shown in Table 1. For both studies, t-tests revealed no difference between conditions on alcohol expectancies or alcohol use variables (all $p's$ > .16), suggesting successful randomization to condition.

### Study 1

A simultaneous regression analysis was conducted to examine whether alcohol primes interacted with sociability-related alcohol expectancies to influence sociability-related self-conceptions. The alcohol use variable was also entered as a covariate. Neither the main effects of Prime, sociability-related alcohol expectancies, nor alcohol use yielded a significant effect. However, there was a significant interaction between Prime and centered sociability-related expectancy scores ($\beta$ = .40, $p$ < .05). As predicted, inspection of the simple effects within the two conditions indicated that sociability-related alcohol expectancies were positively associated with sociability-related self-concept ratings in the alcohol priming condition ($\beta$ = .38, $p$ < .05), yet unassociated with these ratings in the control condition ($\beta$ = −.18, $p$ = .33). The generated means (+/− 1 SD) for this interaction are shown in Panel A of Figure 1.

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[3]Because the typical frequency item was rated on a 1-5 scale, and the typical quantity of drinking item was rated on a 1-6 scale, we standardized these items before creating an overall drinking variable.

Additional analyses revealed that aggression-related alcohol expectancies did not interact with Prime to predict sociability-related self-concept ratings ($p = .89$), and sociability-related alcohol expectancies did not interact with Prime to predict self-ratings on positive traits unrelated to sociability ($p = .26$). These null findings suggest that alcohol primes influenced the working self-concept in a manner consistent with the specific content of individuals' alcohol expectancies.

### Study 2

For Study 2, an identical regression analysis was conducted. Again, the only significant effect to emerge was a Prime X Sociability Expectancy interaction ($\beta = .31$, $p < .05$). As predicted, sociability-related alcohol expectancies were positively associated with sociability-related self-ratings in the alcohol priming condition ($\beta = .32$, $p < .05$), yet unassociated with sociability-related self-ratings in the control condition ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .47$). The generated means ($+/- 1$ SD) for this interaction are shown in Panel B of Figure 1.

Consistent with Study 1, additional analyses revealed that aggression-related alcohol expectancies did not interact with Prime to predict sociability-related ratings ($p = .82$) and that sociability-related alcohol expectancies did not interact with Prime to predict general positive self ratings ($p = .15$). These null findings additionally support the contention that alcohol primes and alcohol expectancies interactively affect the working self-concept in an expectancy-consistent manner.

## Discussion

In two studies, individuals with stronger expectancies that drinking engenders sociability viewed themselves as more sociable after exposure to either alcohol-related images (Study1) or words (Study 2). This effect was specific to individuals with sociability-related alcohol expectancies and to domains of the self-concept directly related to sociability. Together, these findings suggest that rudimentary alcohol primes selectively activate alcohol expectancy-related information in long-term memory, promoting expectancy-consistent self-perceptions even in the absence of actual or anticipated alcohol consumption.

These results provide new insight on the influence of alcohol expectancies on self-perception. Decades of research using balanced placebo design studies has demonstrated that the belief that one has consumed alcohol can influence behaviors known to be associated with consumption (e.g., George & Marlatt, 1986; Lang, Goeckner, Adesso, & Marlatt, 1975; Wilson & Abrams, 1977). More recently, it has been found that mere alcohol primes affect alcohol-related non-consumptive behavior in an analogous fashion (e.g., Bartholow & Heinz, 2006; Friedman, McCarthy, Förster, & Denzler, 2005). While these effects are assumed to result from the activation of alcohol expectancies, the precise mechanisms by which these activated cognitive representations influence thought and behavior is unclear.

The present results suggest that alcohol expectancy activation may, in part, influence behavior by fostering expectancy-consistent working self-concept change. Scores of studies suggest that the working self-concept plays a primary role in regulating behavior, essentially

providing a schema that individuals consult when choosing their actions in a given context (e.g., Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). If contextually-activated alcohol expectancies transiently alter this self-schema to include traits such as "sociable", "aggressive", or "relaxed", individuals may be more likely to act in accordance with these traits.

The current studies are limited by a number of factors. First, only one (brief) measure of sociability alcohol expectancies was administered. These results need to be replicated using standard alcohol expectancy measures. Second, there was approximately a 1½ month lag time between the preliminary session and the laboratory session. Thus, it is possible that some participants' alcohol expectancies might have changed due to more recent experiences with alcohol. In previous work, we have found that this length of lag time had only a minimal influence on one's endorsement of alcohol expectancies (Friedman et al., 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to replicate these results using a shorter lag time between the two sessions. In addition, we have argued that the implicit activation of alcohol expectancies changes the working self-concept. Unfortunately, we did not assess within subjects changes in self perceptions. Measuring within subject changes is necessary in order to unequivocally demonstrate changes in participants' working self-concept (e.g., Steele & Josephs, 1990). Finally, because all of our participants were college students, who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course, it is unclear whether these findings would generalize to other college students or other non-student populations.

These studies leave a number of important questions for future investigation. For example, do these effects generalize beyond sociability to other expectancy domains? Would people who possess strong negative alcohol expectancies similarly rate themselves in an expectancy consistent manner after exposure to alcohol primes? This possibility is at odds with research showing people are motivated to maintain a sense of positive self-regard (e.g., Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Taylor & Brown, 1988), and sometimes selectively ignore negative self-relevant stimuli (Sedikides & Green, 2000). Understanding whether the activation of other (in this case, negative) alcohol expectancies influences the self-concept in an expectancy consistent manner can potentially further elucidate how the activation of alcohol expectancies influence self-perceptions, as well as how people judge themselves more generally.

In addition, future research should examine whether alcohol use influences the effects of alcohol primes on self-perceptions. For example, is it possible that light drinkers/abstainers would be less influenced by these primes due to their lack of experience with alcohol (Goldman, 1999)? Or would chronic alcohol users, somewhat paradoxically, be less influenced by these types of primes because they likely already have concepts related to alcohol chronically activated (see Higgins, 1996)? Finally, what is the role of motivation to possess a certain expectancy-related personality trait? For example, if the individual expects that alcohol will make her sociable *and* desires to become more extroverted, will this positively moderate the influence of alcohol priming on her self-view (e.g., Steele & Josephs, 1990)? Studies addressing such issues promise to substantially advance understanding of the way in which memory processes, particularly those associated with self-representation, contribute to the influence of alcohol on social behavior.

## Acknowledgments

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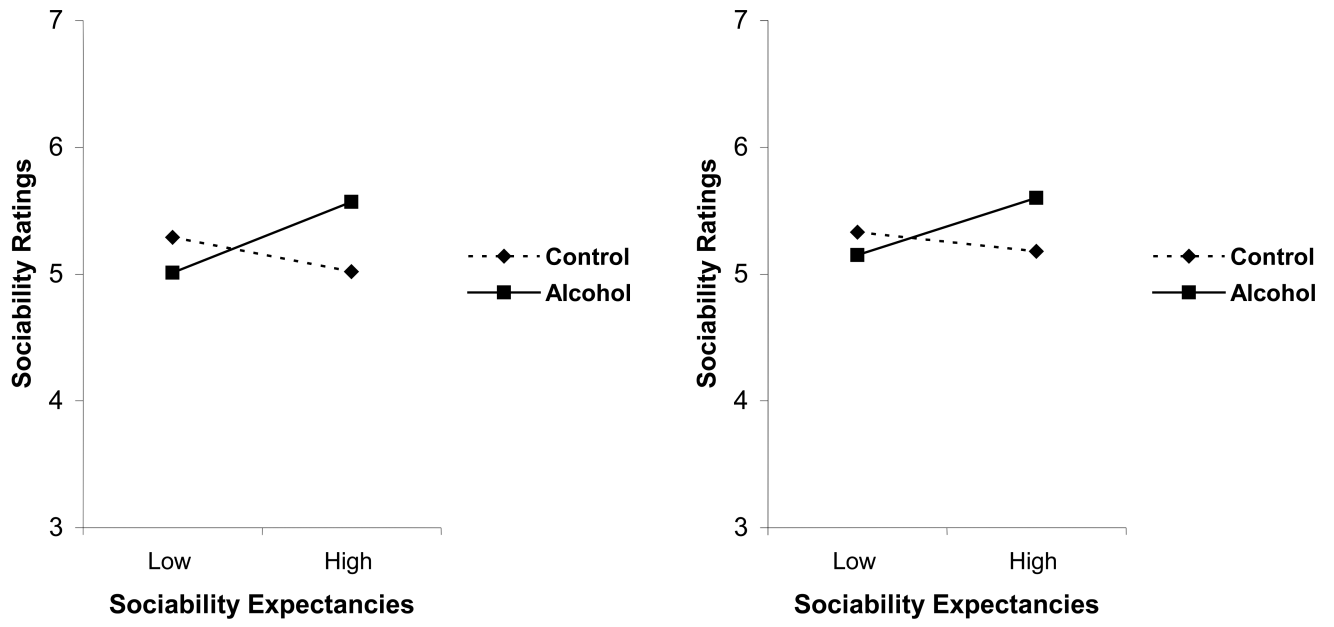
Panel A

Panel B

**Figure 1.**
Sociability Ratings as a Function of Primes and Sociability Related Alcohol Expectancies

**Table 1**

Correlations among Expectancies, Self-Concept and Typical Alcohol Use[a]

|   |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | B-CEOA –Sociability | - |  |  |  |  |
| 2 | B-CEOA –Aggression | 0.35** | - |  |  |  |
| 3 | Sociability Traits | 0.16 | −.11 | - |  |  |
| 4 | General Positive Traits | 0.08 | −.09 | 0.43** | - |  |
| 5 | Typical Alcohol Use | 0.26** | .25* | 0.06 | 0.01 | - |

Note.

B-CEOA = Brief Comprehensive Effects of Alcohol Scale.

[a]Collapsed across Studies

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$