



Script representation of alcohol-related aggression in underage drinkers

Introduction

It is well known that alcohol consumption is a risk factor for violence, and that young people are at risk of both perpetration and victimisation after drinking alcohol. To some extent this is due to the pharmacological properties of alcohol, but research also demonstrates that aggression can be prompted by the mere belief that one has drunk alcohol. This can be attributed to cultural scripts, or commonly-held beliefs concerning accepted behavioural patterns. One example is 'lad' culture that links alcohol-related violence with values such as status and power. This study by Dr. Steve Brown (University of Liverpool), Dr. Pamela Qualter (University of Central Lancashire) and Professor Sarah Coyne (Brigham Young University: USA) investigated the extent to which these alcohol/aggression scripts are known and understood by young people approaching legal drinking age, how they are related to broader beliefs, attitudes and values concerning alcohol use and aggression. We also examined links with preferences for violent media.

The study investigated alcohol/aggression scripts in three ways:

1. using content analyses of essays written in response to ambiguous alcohol stimuli, where we anticipated that young people would show some aggression-related themes in their writing;
2. using an implicit task, where young people were primed for alcohol using pictures of alcoholic or non-alcoholic drinks and speed of response to aggression cues was measured. Here, an interaction between the prime and nature of the target word was expected, with quicker reaction times observed in the alcohol prime/aggression word group; and
3. using a laboratory aggression task where, after exposure to alcohol versus non-alcohol pictures, participants completed the Computer Reaction Time task (CRT), a procedure that allowed participants to blast other participants (nonexistent) with varying noise intensities. It was expected that alcohol-based primes would be associated with greater aggression.

In addition, we investigated whether media exposure to alcohol use was associated with young people's alcohol/aggression scripts.



Findings

1. When asked to write short descriptive stories based on a verbal prompt, and stimulus photographs of intoxicated males and females, 82% of the sample (aged 11-14) mentioned physical or verbal conflict for the verbal prompt, 53% for male and 34% for female photographs. This suggests that participants are, in many cases, aware of the potential conflict during and after drinking. However, participants were not specific about the nature of this conflict, describing few instances of planned aggression, perpetration or being a victim.
2. The CRT task provided evidence for participants' representations of links between alcohol and aggressive behaviour, with participants providing a greater intensity of punishment in a laboratory aggression task after priming with an alcohol stimulus. Frequent drinkers showed comparatively greater aggression after priming than non-drinkers or infrequent drinkers in the CRT task. A word recognition task did not show evidence of implicit semantic priming effects of alcohol-related words on physical aggression words.
3. The findings show a small, but significant relationship between viewing alcohol use on television and feeling positive about someone who engages in fighting after drinking. Exposure to TV alcohol use was not related to drinking alcohol or engaging in antisocial behaviour. Rather, it appears to influence the attitudes a person has about other individuals who would engage in alcohol related aggression.

Implications

The study provided evidence that adolescents under the legal drinking age possess linked representations of the relationship between alcohol use and aggression. These involve some level of expectation that drinking in young people can lead to aggression and the finding that alcohol-related stimuli can prime laboratory aggression. These two findings are statistically separate to each other and suggest that links in mental representations of alcohol and aggression can occur at differing levels. Both effects are statistically independent of participants' attitudes and perceptions of social norms. Thus, it is difficult to understand the meaning that



young people attach to these links. Further empirical investigation of these processes is warranted: such work is important before any interventions are proposed or designed based on the current findings.

Further Information.

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