

College Students' Misperceptions Regarding Their Peers Feelings of Comfort in Drinking Situations: A Proactive Intervention Model

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Abstract

This proactive model regarding alcohol abuse prevention in colleges and universities is designed to help clarify students' misperceptions regarding their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. Students inaccurately perceive that their peers are more comfortable in drinking situations than they are themselves. These misperceptions may lead students to believe that they do not fit in and encourage them to drink more than they would otherwise. They do fit in, but they do not realize it. This model is unique, not only because of the category of misperceptions being clarified, but also because it involves parents of college and university students. The model is designed to encourage a dialogue between parents and their sons and daughters regarding alcohol abuse on campus. Parents' involvement is necessary to help clarify these misperceptions.

Keywords: Alcohol Abuse Prevention, Colleges, Universities, Leadership, Higher Education, Public Administration, Prevention Model, Students, Misperceptions

1. Introduction

The foundation for this model is drawn from part of a larger study completed by Synnott in 2000. This earlier study focused on students' misperceptions associated with their peers' consumption of alcoholic beverages and feelings of comfort in drinking situations. The background sections below describe in part the earlier study. Specifically, this section of the earlier study relates to students' misperceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. This model developed from this earlier study follows the same format developed by Synnott in 2011 to involve parents in a prevention model associated with their sons' and daughters' misperceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations.

2. Background of the Study

Perkins and Berkowitz introduced the theoretical construct of university and college students' misperceptions regarding their peers' consumption of alcohol as a prevention issue in 1986 (Perkins, 1995). The cornerstone of the theory is that clarifying students' misperceptions might result in fewer alcohol-related problems because perceived norms lose their influence when consensus breaks down (Perkins, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993, 1996). The misperception investigated in this study relates to students' beliefs regarding their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. Few studies have addressed this topic.

2.1 Pluralistic Ignorance

Allport (1924) stated that an individual's behavior is dependent on the perceived universality of a group's norm. Members of a group assume that all members of the group subscribe to the group's social norm. However, these assumptions or perceptions are false at times. For example, research showed that students inaccurately perceived that their peers were more comfortable in drinking situations than they were themselves (Prentice & Miller, 1993; 1996; Schroeder and Prentice cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996). This is an example of pluralistic ignorance, that is, individuals' false ideas regarding other members of their social groups (O'Gorman & Garry, 1976) or a state in which "no one believes, but in which everyone believes that everyone else believes" (Krech, Crutchfield, & Ballachey, 1962, p. 248). This study focuses on students' misperceptions of their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. These misperceptions are examples of pluralistic ignorance. Pluralistic ignorance emerges when "the social environment is misperceived by individuals who unintentionally serve as cultural carriers of cognitive error" (O'Gorman & Garry, 1976, p. 450).

Pluralistic ignorance is manifest in situations in which individuals' public behaviors are the same as others, but they believe that their private feelings, thoughts, and behaviors differ from others regarding the norm when they do not (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1993, 1996). They think and feel differently than their peers, but may act similarly to others because they fear feeling deviant or embarrassed (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991) or because they want to identify with the student body (Prentice & Miller, 1996).

Allport (1924) stated, "Like-mindedness, the sum of all similar feelings, thoughts and acts, is the basis of acquisition for a *consciousness of kind* which knots the group firmly together" (p. 390). He also provided the following example regarding pluralistic behavior:

The caw of one crow is more readily stimulated by the caw of another crow than by any other agency. Association follows this line of least resistance (greatest similarity), and individuals having like mechanisms of response tend to be drawn together. A stimulus, if strong enough, produces like responses in like organisms, a fact which gives rise to social solidarity. Circumstantial pressures, however, introduce new elements and dissimilarities; hence arises a conflict resulting in social change and progress. (p. 391) Pluralistic ignorance may play a role in the false consensus effect (Ross, Greene, and House, 1977), but it is not the same concept. The false consensus effect is the tendency of people to overestimate shared characteristics with others (McFarland & Miller, 1990). Prentice and Miller (1993) stated, "The norm misperception that arises in cases of pluralistic ignorance is most appropriately operationalized as a mean difference between the actual group norm and the perceived group norm: false consensus, on the other hand, is most appropriately operationalized as a positive correlation between ratings of the self and ratings of others" (p. 252).

2.2 Misperceptions Regarding Feelings of Comfort in Drinking Situations

Prentice and Miller (1993) conducted four studies at Princeton to investigate the relationship between students' attitudes toward alcohol practices and their perceptions of their peers' attitudes.

The first study examined the following: (a) the difference between students' private attitudes toward alcohol consumption on campus and their perceptions of the social norm, and (b) the extent to which social norms were perceived as universal.

The sample consisted of 132 undergraduate students, 63 were male students and 69 were female students. Students were volunteers who filled out several questionnaires on Questionnaire Day (i.e., students participate in various studies for pay on a scheduled day) at the school.

The findings included the following: (a) participants were much less comfortable with the drinking habits on campus than they believed the average student to be, (b) the gap between self reports of comfort and perceptions of others' comfort was greater for female students than for male students, and (c) an illusion of universality regarding the social norm existed.

The second study was designed to: (a) eliminate possible alternative explanations of the first study by reordering the questions regarding self and others, and (b) assess students' perceptions regarding friends rather than the average student.

The sample consisted of 242 undergraduate students, 97 were male students and 145 were female students. Students were paid volunteers who filled out several questionnaires on Questionnaire Day at the school.

The findings included the following: (a) students' feelings of comfort were significantly less than their perceptions of their friends' comfort or their perceptions of the average student's comfort, (b) students rated friends' comfort as between their own comfort and the average student's comfort, and (c) the difference between friends and the average student was significant only when the average student question was asked first.

The third study was designed to: (a) explore the consequences of pluralistic ignorance over time, and (b) examine the extent students would change their attitudes or reduce pluralistic ignorance.

A random sample of sophomores was selected to participate. The sample consisted of 50 students, 25 were males and 25 were females. Telephone surveys were conducted in September and then again in December.

Participants were asked the following: (a) how comfortable they were with drinking practices on campus; (b) what their perceptions were regarding how comfortable the average student felt with drinking practices on campus; (c) how many alcoholic drinks they had in the past week; and (d) how many drinks they had in a typical week.

The findings included the following: (a) male students changed their attitudes in the direction of the social norm over time, (b) male students' drinking habits and perceptions of others' comfort was a poor predictor of their own comfort at the start of the term, but prediction improved with time, (c) female students did not change their attitudes in the direction of the social norm over time, and (d) female students' drinking habits and perceptions of others' comfort was a good predictor of their own comfort at the beginning of the term, but prediction deteriorated over time.

The fourth study examined the link between pluralistic ignorance and feelings of alienation from an institutional norm and from the institution. The case of pluralistic ignorance involved a new policy that had been implemented that banned kegs of beer on campus. This ban was unpopular and an apparent negative attitude toward the ban was evident. The authors assumed that the students' private thoughts were not as negative.

The sample consisted of 94 undergraduate students, 42 were male students and 52 were female students. Students were paid volunteers who filled out several questionnaires on Questionnaire Day at the school.

Students were asked the following; (a) how did they feel about the new policy, (b) compared to them, how did the average Princeton undergraduate feel about the new policy, (c) how many signatures would they be willing to collect to protest the ban, (d) how much time would they be willing to spend discussing ways to protest the ban, (e) what percentage of reunions did they plan to attend after graduation, and (f) how likely were they to donate money to Princeton after graduation.

The authors identified two groups for comparison. The others-more-negative group consisted of 29 male students and 40 female students who perceived that the average student was much more negative or somewhat more negative regarding the ban than they were themselves. The others-the-same group consisted of 11 males and 11 women who perceived that the average student felt about the same as they did. The authors stated, "This distribution of subjects into these two categories confirmed our expectations that students' attitudes toward the keg ban, like their general comfort with alcohol, would be characterized by pluralistic ignorance. They showed a systematic tendency to believe that the average student felt more negatively about the keg ban than they did" (p. 251).

The findings included the following: (a) members of the others-more-negative group held more favorable attitudes toward the ban than did members of others-the-same group, (b) students who felt their attitude was different than the norm were less willing to take action, and (c) there were significant effects regarding willingness to collect signatures, willingness to work hours, and percentage of reunions expected to attend, but not on likelihood to donate money.

The authors suggested the following: (a) students may conform to the misperceived norm because of their desire to be correct and to fit in; (b) if students come to believe what they inaccurately perceive others believe then their original erroneous perceptions will become accurate at both the private and the public level, that is, their own correct judgments will be driven out; (c) victims of pluralistic ignorance are involuntary deviants and experience discomfort, alienation, and an inclination to move toward the perceived majority (e.g., males in Study 3); (d) students may be less likely to conform to real or imagined majority influence (e.g., females in Study 3); (e) programs designed to reach individuals, such as informational campaigns and individual counseling may change private attitudes, but not public behavior or social norms; and (f) social change may be expedited by exposing pluralistic ignorance by encouraging students to speak openly about their private attitudes in groups.

Prentice and Miller conducted a study in 1995 at Princeton designed to gather evidence regarding two assumptions, namely: (a) students exhibit more comfort publicly than they feel privately, and (b) students judge the private beliefs of others based on their public behaviors (cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996).

The sample consisted of female undergraduates from the same class who were not acquainted with each other. Groups consisting of two to four members were formed for this study. (This is all of the information that was provided regarding subjects for this unpublished study.)

First, subjects filled out a brief questionnaire to provide information regarding the following: (a) their own comfort with alcohol use at Princeton, and (b) their perceptions regarding the comfort of the average female student. Second, subjects were instructed to discuss the following: (a) campus practices associated with alcohol, (b) their own feelings about students' drinking practices, and (c) their own experiences with alcohol use. Third, subjects filled out another questionnaire to provide information regarding the following: (a) the individual's ratings of other members in the group regarding their comfort with alcohol, (b) the individual's perception of how comfortable other members believe she is with alcohol, (c) how similar others' opinions are to hers, and (d) in groups of three or more, how similar opinions are to each other.

The findings included the following: (a) participants believed that they were less comfortable with alcohol practices than the average female student, (b) students exhibited more comfort publicly according to their ratings of how other members' would rate them than they stated in the prediscussion questionnaire, (c) their ratings of comfort expressed to others was closer to their perceived levels of comfort for the average female student than to their own private feelings, and (d) members' ratings of each others' comfort were aligned with their ratings of what they conveyed to others and were significantly higher than prediscussion ratings.

The authors suggested the following: (a) the evidence showed that pluralistic ignorance was evident regarding students' feelings of comfort with alcohol use, (b) students' publicly stated opinions related to liberal drinking norms, and (c) students falsely perceived more support existed for these norms than was warranted.

Schroeder and Prentice conducted a study in 1995 at Princeton designed to investigate the consequences of correcting students' misperceptions associated with their peers' attitudes associated with alcohol consumption (cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996). The sample consisted of entering students. Students were assigned to either: (a) the peer-oriented condition group to discuss pluralistic ignorance and its implications or to (b) the individual-oriented condition group to discuss how individuals make responsible decisions regarding alcohol consumption. The first group was the experimental group and the second group was used as the control group. (This is all of the information that was provided regarding subjects for this unpublished study.)

The research design included the following: (a) first students filled out a brief questionnaire to provide information regarding their comfort level with alcohol use and their perceptions of the average student's feelings of comfort with alcohol use; (b) students watched a seven minute video that illustrated several alcohol-related scenes in a university setting; (c) students participated in a 20 minute discussion session; (d) students filled out Watson and Friend's (1969) Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale to assess how anxious individuals were regarding others' evaluations of them and their fear of losing others' approval, and (e) four to six months later students in both groups provided information regarding their alcohol consumption, their feelings of comfort and belonging on campus, their perceptions of the average student's feelings of comfort with alcohol use, and involvement with campus groups.

The findings included the following: (a) subjects in the peer-oriented condition group or experimental group who drank alcohol reduced their consumption of alcohol; (b) a significant difference was shown regarding the reduction in pluralistic ignorance for students in both groups with the reduction for female students greater than the reduction for male students; (c) perceptions of the average student and drinking depended on fear of negative evaluation (FNE) for the control group, that is, high FNE subjects drank less than low FNE subjects when they perceived others' comfort levels to be low and more when they perceived others' comfort levels to be high; and (d) all of the subjects in the experimental group reflected the results from the low FNE subjects in the control group.

The authors concluded the following: (a) informing students regarding pluralistic ignorance reduced perceived support for the norm and therefore lessened the social pressure to drink excessively; (b) observed differences in drinking (i.e., students in the experimental group drank less than students in the control group) were due in part to differences in the prescriptive strength of the drinking norms, that is, reducing pluralistic ignorance reduced the prescriptive strength of the norm; (c) students in the experimental group showed less evidence of social pressure than did students in the control group; (d) students acting on these misperceptions provide support for these misperceptions thus strengthening their false beliefs; and (e) students' misperceptions regarding others' attitudes have consequences for their own attitudes, behavior, and affection for the university. The studies described above indicate that reducing pluralistic ignorance may result in social change. Information provided from surveys used to study social comparisons may be effective in lessening pluralistic ignorance (Miller & McFarland, 1991).

For example, an objective check of individuals' true feelings resulted in eliminating pluralistic ignorance regarding prohibition (Katz & Schanck, 1938). Baer, Kivlahan, Fromme, and Marlatt (1994) stated that advice based on feedback from a comprehensive assessment might motivate college students to change their drinking practices.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participant Selection

A representative sample was drawn using the systematic sampling technique (Baum, Gable, & List, 1987, p. 54; Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1988, pp. 165-166). Participants were full-time undergraduate students attending a public University in Connecticut, and lived either on-campus or off-campus. Specifically, every third student from the University's master enrollment list of 3,148 students was selected to participate. A total of 1,047 students were selected to participate.

3.11 Response Rate

Questionnaires were returned by 373 students. One questionnaire was excluded because the student returned the instrument after the deadline. A total of 372 questionnaires were used for analyses representing a response rate of 35.5%.

3.2 Quantitative Component

3.21 The Instrument

The instrument contains six statements (i.e., 18 items) responded to on a four-point Likert agreement scale used to assess the following: (a) Students' feelings of comfort in situations where alcohol is consumed; (b) Students' feelings of comfort in situations where the main activity is drinking; (c) Students' feelings of comfort with a date who has been drinking; (d) Students' feelings of comfort at parties with strangers where alcohol is served; (e) Students' feelings of comfort at parties with strangers who have had too much to drink; and (f) Students' feelings of comfort at parties where drinking games are played. (See page 22.) Item stems are positive to lessen the potential for confusion (Pilotte & Gable, 1990).

3.22 Content Validity

The foundation for content validity for the survey was the review of the literature. A panel of experts from the University community reviewed the item stems. Members of the panel included the following: (a) the alcohol coordinator, (b) the director of academic advising, (c) a clinical social worker, (d) a nurse practitioner, (e) an Assistant Professor of Psychology, and (f) a Professor from the Social Work Program.

3.23 Construct Validity and Reliability

The instrument was tested for construct validity and reliability at the University of Connecticut. A random sample of students from Residential Life was developed by computer. This sample consisted of 715 students or approximately 12% of the undergraduate students living on campus. Participants were administered a questionnaire developed for this study to determine: (a) how comfortable they feel in the drinking situations mentioned above; and (b) their perceptions regarding how comfortable their peers feel in the same drinking situations. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to empirically derive factors reflected by the items. Three factors were identified, namely, Self Perception Comfortability, Perception Typical Male Student's Comfortability, and Perception Typical Female Student's Comfortability. Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the three factors identified above are .90, .84, and .81 respectively.

3.24 Data Analysis

SPSS was used to analyze the data. The .05 level of significance was used. The treatment of missing data was controlled by excluding cases listwise to ensure that all tests were performed using the same cases (Norusis, 1997). All outliers were the result of inaccurate data entry and were corrected.

3.3 Qualitative Component

The purpose of the qualitative component was to explore in-depth students' responses to the survey, that is, to provide understanding and insight in order to see reality from their point of view (Krueger, 1994). Four focus groups were conducted to accomplish this objective.

4. Results

4.1 Situations

4.11 Comfort in Drinking Situations

Students' self reports regarding this item, that is, feelings of comfort in drinking situations showed the following: (a) 80 (21.7%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that they felt comfortable in drinking situations, (b) 289 (78.3%) students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in drinking situations, (c) 16 (4.4%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in drinking situations, (d) 347 (95.6%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in drinking situations, (e) 45 (12.4%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in drinking situations, and (f) 317 (87.5%) students strongly agreed or agreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in drinking situations.

4.12 Comfort In Situations Where Drinking Was The Main Activity

Students' self reports regarding this item, that is, feelings of comfort in situations where drinking was the main activity showed the following: (a) 121 (32.9%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (b) 217 (59%) students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (c) 38 (10.6%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (d) 322 (89.4%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (e) 86 (23.9%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, and (f) 274 (76.1%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations.

4.13 Comfort In Situations With A Date Who Has Been Drinking

Students' self reports regarding this item, that is, feelings of comfort in situations with a date who had been drinking showed the following: (a) 210 (57.4%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (b) 156 (42.6%) students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (c) 64 (17.7%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (d) 297 (82.3%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (e) 203 (56.4%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, and (f) 157 (43.6%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations.

4.14 Comfort In Situations With Strangers Where Alcohol Is Served

Students' self reports regarding this item, that is, feelings of comfort in situations with strangers where alcohol is served showed the following: (a) 178 (48.6%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (b) 188 (51.4%) students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (c) 58 (16.2%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (d) 299 (83.8%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (e) 133 (37.3%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, and (f) 224 (62.7%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations.

4.15 Comfort In Situations With Strangers Who Have Had Too Much To Drink

Students' self reports regarding this item, that is, feelings of comfort in situations with strangers who have had too much to drink showed the following: (a) 284 (80.0%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (b) 85 (23.04%) students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (c) 142 (39.4%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (d) 218 (60.6%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (e) 242 (67.2%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, and (f) 118 (32.8%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations.

4.16 Comfort At Parties Where Drinking Games Are Played

Students' self reports regarding this item, that is, feelings of comfort at parties where drinking games are played showed the following: (a) 113 (31.0%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (b) 252 (69.0%) students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (c) 22 (6.1%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (d) 337 (93.9%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical male student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, (e) 61 (17.0%) students strongly disagreed or disagreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations, and (f) 298 (83.0%) students agreed or strongly agreed that the typical female student felt comfortable in these drinking situations.

4.2 Misperceptions Associated with Feelings of Comfort in Drinking Situations

Paired samples t tests were conducted to see if there were significant differences between students' self reports regarding their feelings of comfort in drinking situations and their perceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. SELFCOMFORT (i.e., students' self reports regarding their feelings of comfort in drinking situations) was compared to MALECOMFORT (i.e., students' perceptions regarding the typical male student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations) and to FEMALECOMFORT (i.e., students' perceptions regarding the typical female student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations). The significance level of .05 was selected. The assumption of normality was checked by developing histograms with the normal curve imposed and Q-Q plots. The data appear to come from populations with normal distributions.

There was a significant difference between students' self reports regarding their feelings of comfort in drinking situations and their perceptions associated with the typical male student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations, $t(360) = -17.31$, $p < .0005$. There was a significant difference between students' self reports regarding their feelings of comfort in drinking situations and their perceptions associated with the typical female student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations, $t(360) = -5.95$, $p < .0005$. Students inaccurately perceive that their peers are more comfortable in drinking situations than they are themselves. There was no significant difference between male students and female students regarding their perceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. Students inaccurately perceive that the typical male student and the typical female student feel more comfortable in drinking situations than they do themselves. There was a significant difference between students' feelings of comfort in drinking situations and their perceptions of the typical male student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations, $t(360) = -17.31$, $p < .0005$. There was a significant difference between students' feelings of comfort in drinking situations and their perceptions of the typical female student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations, $t(360) = -5.95$, $p < .0005$.

5. Discussion

5.1 How the Findings Relate to Previous Research

There were significant differences between students' self reports regarding their feelings of comfort in six drinking situations and their perceptions regarding the typical male student's feelings of comfort and the typical female student's feelings of comfort in the same drinking situations. They inaccurately perceived that their peers were more comfortable than they were themselves. This finding is consistent with previous research regarding students' misperceptions regarding comfort in drinking situations (Prentice & Miller, 1993; 1996; Schroeder and Prentice cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996). Students inaccurately perceived that their peers were more comfortable in drinking situations than they were themselves. This finding is consistent with previous research regarding students' misperceptions associated with comfort in drinking situations (Prentice & Miller, 1993; Prentice & Miller, 1995 cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996; Schroeder & Prentice, 1995 cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996).

Focus group participants indicated that wanting to fit in was the main cause for misperceptions associated with feelings of comfort in drinking situations. Prentice and Miller (1993) stated that undergraduate students believe that other undergraduate students are more comfortable with drinking than they are themselves. Students already do fit in, but they erroneously base their perceptions on their observations of their peers' public behavior and incorrectly assume that this behavior reflects their peers' private thoughts. Male students reported feeling more comfortable than female students in drinking situations. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted by Prentice and Miller (1993).

Although the authors did not state that there was a significant difference between male students and female students regarding their comfort with drinking habits on campus, their data showed that male students were more comfortable than female students. Their study included the following question related to self comfort: "How comfortable do you feel with the alcohol drinking habits of students at Princeton?" (p. 245). The ratings were made on an 11 point scale with 1 representing not at all comfortable and 11 representing very comfortable. The mean for male students was 6.03 and the mean for female students was 4.68.

There were no significant differences between male students and female students regarding their perceptions of the typical male student's and the typical female student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations. This finding is consistent with previous research conducted by Prentice and Miller (1993). Although the authors did not state that there were no significant differences between male students and female students regarding their perceptions of their peers' comfort with drinking habits on campus, their data showed that the mean scores for male students and female students on perceptions of their peers' comfort with the drinking habits on campus were almost identical. Their study included the following question related to students' perceptions of their peers' comfort with drinking habits on campus: "How comfortable does the average Princeton undergraduate feel with the alcohol drinking habits of students at Princeton?" (p. 245). The ratings were made on the 11 point scale mentioned above. The mean for male students was 7.00 and the mean for female students was 7.07.

Focus group members suggested that this is not a gender specific issue. They offered the following plausible reasons for this finding: (a) students do not pay attention to how much alcohol their peers are drinking, (b) drinking at the time clouds these perceptions, and (c) students perceive other students as equals. Focus group participants suggested that this finding might prove to be beneficial because it may prove to be less expensive for schools to develop prevention and intervention programs because both sexes are starting at the same place regarding their misperceptions. It might be possible to design prevention and intervention efforts to clarify students' misperceptions associated with comfort in drinking situations for both male students and female students instead of designing separate programs for male students and female students.

Focus group participants indicated that the target population should be freshmen. It is well known that alcohol abuse prevention and intervention efforts today can be found at all levels of education including elementary school, junior high school, high school, and all years at the college level. However, students were concerned because they feel that this group is especially vulnerable.

Focus group participants' suggestions regarding possible solutions included showing new students the results of the survey. This finding is consistent with previous research. Perkins and Berkowitz (1986b) commented on the importance of conducting regular surveys to include all student cohorts to produce campus specific information regarding misperceptions. They stated that this information would interest them because it is about them.

5.2 How the Findings Differ from Previous Research

Focus group participants indicated that misperceptions associated with feelings of comfort in drinking situations were formed before students enter colleges and universities. I am not aware of previous research efforts that specifically addressed when college students develop misperceptions associated with feelings of comfort in drinking situations. This finding makes sense. Burrell (1992) stated that by the time students arrive on campus they are already consumers of alcohol. Undergraduates' drinking habits are established before they enter college (Burrell, 1992). Therefore, students have been exposed to drinking situations before they enter college. It is unlikely that students' perceptions suddenly change regarding their new peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. Focus group members suggested that for clarifying students' misperceptions to be effective, these efforts must begin before students arrive on campus. I am not aware of previous research that suggests that administrators and alcohol abuse prevention specialists attempt to clarify their school's incoming students' misperceptions associated with their peers' consumption of alcohol and feelings of comfort in drinking situations before they arrive on campus.

6. Implications and Recommendations

The present study showed that students inaccurately perceive that their peers are more comfortable in drinking situations than they are themselves. Individuals holding these misperceptions included: (a) male students and (b) female students. These findings are important because students may increase their consumption in order to fit in (Prentice & Miller, 1993)

These misperceptions can be clarified. Schroeder and Prentice (cited in Prentice & Miller, 1996) found that students reduced their consumption of alcohol after participating in peer-oriented group discussions that included information regarding students' misperceptions associated with their peers' level of comfort with alcohol drinking habits on campus. Administrators and alcohol abuse prevention specialists need to be aware of these findings. They need to provide students with accurate campus specific information regarding their misperceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations in order to clarify these misperceptions. They need to provide this information on a regular basis to insure that all students are exposed to it several times.

6.1 Clarifying Students' Misperceptions

Clarifying students' misperceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations is a two step process that is repeated yearly. First, alcohol abuse prevention specialists need to gather campus specific information regarding students' misperceptions using the instrument developed for the present study. Students may be more receptive to information that is garnered from students attending the same school (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986b). Scott and Ambrosion (1995) stated, "Campuses risk the loss of programmatic effectiveness if they choose to replicate prevention strategies based on models used on other campuses without first thoroughly investigating and factoring in the unique patterns of the students on that campus" (p. 31). Also, involving students in surveys can have an immediate effect on students. Perkins and Berkowitz (1986b) stated, "Surveys call for a reflection on one's own behavior and can help individuals evaluate the role that drinking plays in their lives" (p. 46). They also noted that, "participation in surveys may also facilitate subsequent discussion among students and promote interest in addressing alcohol-related concerns on campus" (p. 46).

Second, this campus specific information must be disseminated to the entire college or university community. There are two sub populations that need to be addressed for this process to be effective. The first sub population is the incoming freshmen class. The second sub population is comprised of the returning sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The data collected from these two sub populations can be merged and used for intervention and prevention.

7. The Model

The following model format is taken from Synnott's *College Students' Parental Involvement: A Proactive Model for Alcohol Abuse Prevention* (2011). The model has been modified to address students' and parents' perceptions related to students' perceptions regarding their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations.

7.1 Model Procedures

7.12 Parents receive a letter from the alcohol abuse prevention team at their son's or daughter's school inviting them to be proactive in their son's or daughter's education by helping them clarify misperceptions that their sons and daughters may have regarding their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations. The letter is personalized and includes the parents' names and the name of their son or daughter. Parents receive the letter in October after their son or daughter has attended school for two months. This is important because the perceptions must relate to the students' college peers and not their high school peers.

7.13 Parents are invited to participate by completing the survey below regarding (a) their perceptions regarding what they think are their son's or daughter's feelings of comfort in drinking situations, (b) their perceptions regarding what they think are the typical male student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations, and (c) their perceptions regarding what they think are the typical female student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations. Anonymity is assured. Parents are informed that their son or daughter will participate in an alcohol abuse prevention activity on campus by completing the same survey administered by the same alcohol abuse prevention team about the same time. Anonymity is also assured for students.

7.14 Parents receive the results of the survey regarding all parents' perceptions associated with their sons' or daughters' feelings of comfort in drinking situations at their son's or daughter's school. Parents also receive the results of the survey for all students who participated regarding their feelings of comfort in drinking situations (i.e., the actual norm on campus) and their perceptions associated with other students' feelings of comfort in drinking situations.

7.15 Parents will be asked to engage in the following activities: (a) share with their son or daughter information regarding all parents' perceptions associated with their sons' or daughters' feelings of comfort in drinking situations and students' perceptions regarding their own feelings of comfort in drinking situations and their perceptions associated with their peers' feelings of comfort in drinking situations, (b) ask their son or daughter if he or she completed the survey presented on campus, and (c) directly engage their son or daughter in a conversation regarding alcohol abuse regardless of their own accurate or inaccurate perceptions or their son's or daughter's accurate or inaccurate perceptions.

8. The Instrument

This study is being conducted to determine students' and parents' perceptions regarding INS (i.e., insert name of school) students' feelings of comfort in drinking situations Your participation is greatly appreciated. Please DO NOT write your name on the questionnaire to insure anonymity. The following questions relate to your perceptions of the typical male student's and the typical female student's feelings of comfort in drinking situations. If you are unsure, please offer your best judgment. Please circle only one number corresponding to your answer under the appropriate heading.

This survey contains statements regarding how comfortable you feel in drinking situations and your perceptions of how comfortable the typical male student and the typical female student feels in drinking situations. If you are unsure, please offer your best judgment. Please read each statement and circle the number that indicates how much you agree with the statement under the appropriate heading.

Self = Students or Self = Parents' perceptions of their sons' or daughters' feelings of comfort in drinking situations.

TMS = Typical Male Student TFS = Typical Female Student

1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Agree 4=Strongly Agree

7. Students at <u>ISN</u> feel comfortable in situations where alcohol is consumed.	<u>Self</u> 1 2 3 4	<u>TMS</u> 1 2 3 4	<u>TFS</u> 1 2 3 4
8. Students at <u>ISN</u> feel comfortable in situations where the main activity is drinking.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
9. Students at <u>ISN</u> feel comfortable with a date who has been drinking.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
10. Students at <u>ISN</u> feel comfortable at parties with strangers where alcohol is served.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
11. Students at <u>ISN</u> feel comfortable at parties with strangers who have had too much to drink.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
12. Students at <u>ISN</u> feel comfortable at parties where drinking games are played.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4

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