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Chilling Effects and Binge Drinking in Platonic and Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Using the chilling effect research as a framework, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of binge drinking to the suppression of grievances in both romantic and close platonic relationships (N = 317). Results demonstrated the association between binge drinking and chilling effects, although this relationship was only evident in friendships. Overall, chilling effects were found to be related to low partner commitment levels and high relational alternatives in romantic relationship. Finally, males and females did not differ in their chilling responses.

Key concepts: Chilling effects, interpersonal relationships, binge drinking, relational alternatives, commitment

Introduction

This study is predicated on examination of two interpersonal social features that young adults are likely to encounter during their college life: relational conflict and interaction with someone who has been drinking heavily. Responses to this combination form the basis of potential “chilling effects” as conceptualized by Cloven and Roloff (1993). Relational partners can expect to experience some type of conflict in their relationship, although each partner’s perception of the conflict may be very different (Cloven & Roloff, 1993, 1995; Knapp, Stafford, & Daly, 1986; Samp & Solomon, 1998, 2001). Behavior perceived as irritating by one relational partner may be unrecognized by the other. This does not necessarily create a problem between the partners unless one or the other suppresses his or her feelings. Often partners do not discuss these irritations or problems because they are concerned about the possible conflict and negative affect that will ensue; this conflict avoidance has been termed the chilling effect (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). Thus, a chilling effect occurs when one partner actively suppresses a complaint or relational talk in order to avoid potential conflict.

Variables such as relational alternatives and aggression that may instigate the chilling effect have been examined, but no studies to date have evaluated the aftermath of alcohol consumption and its potential chilling effect on relational interactions. In a recent study, approximately 80% of college students report drinking at some point in their lives and 70% report drinking within the month (Benton, Schmidt, Newton, Shin, Benton, & Newton, 2004). While alcoholics comprise only a small portion of society, and are generally older, some studies show that 69% of males and 55% of females in college binge drink (Caldwell, 2002). Binge drinking is typically defined as five or more drinks in one sitting for a male and four or more drinks in one sitting for a female (Bichler & Tibbetts, 2003; Caldwell, 2002). These high levels of drinking come with a price. People spending nights drinking, partying and socializing acknowledge that events can go awry; often ending in conflict with a relational partner (Parker & Williams, 2003). The purpose of the present study is to investigate how one relational partner’s negative nights of binge drinking can place a chilling effect on the relationship, in the context of perceived relational alternatives and commitment levels.

The Chilling Effect

The lack of communication in a romantic relationship occurs when one relational partner actively avoids topics—a complaint in particular—because of the other partner’s perceived power (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). This is not explicit power, nor is power discussed openly in the relationship. Similar to taboo topics (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), the chilling effect may only be perceived by one relational partner, just as the power differential is perceived by only one. According to Roloff and Cloven (1990), “If true, then one partner might control the dynamics of a relationship without having to overtly exert influence; his or her behavior and proclivities are rarely, if ever, challenged” (p. 50). This suggests the partner with the perceived power is the catalyst for the chilling effect, and the partner with less power is actually the one who avoids topics and conflicts. Usually relationships increase their conflict as the relationship becomes more serious, but this gradually levels off and partners may become less willing to enter into conflict (Cloven & Roloff, 1994). For partners who are less open, chilling effects have the potential to affect the relationship.

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There are three components to the chilling effect which may better describe this process (Rolloff & Cloven, 1990). First, the focus of the chilling effect is the irritating behaviors or personality traits that could lead to conflict if the relational partner mentioned them. A second component is that these irritations are continuous, and yet the relational partner fails to discuss them (although they may discuss the irritations with a third party). Third, the reason the partner will not discuss these irritations is because it is believed the discussion will lead to conflict, which will damage the relationship (Rolloff & Cloven, 1990). Although ruminating about these irritations may be distressing, it is preferable to the relational partner to try to avoid communicating about the problems, and hence avoid larger issues.

Relational alternatives and commitment levels to the existing relationship have been shown to moderate chilling effects. When respondents report that their romantic partners have many relational alternatives, their willingness to discuss irritations is low, and therefore a chilling effect was felt in the relationship (Cloven & Rolloff, 1993; Rolloff & Cloven, 1990). Individuals perceive their partner as having more power because the relational alternatives suggest more options for the partner. A conflict triggered by the disclosure of irritations could be seen as more detrimental to the relationship if one relational partner has more alternatives. In a college setting where there is an abundance of possible relational partners, the likelihood of relational alternatives is heightened. It appears that having relational alternatives is a viable explanation for the chilling effect, and possibly more so for college students.

Chilling effects as a reflection of commitment levels have had more mixed results than the relational alternatives as a moderator. This may be because some relationships have such high commitment that relational alternatives are not an issue (Cloven & Rolloff, 1993). Previous studies associate low perceived commitment, or intimacy, to the chilling effect (Rolloff & Cloven, 1990; Samp & Solomon, 2001). Commitment levels may influence the chilling effect as the relationship becomes more intimate because the relational partners have more concern for the consequences to the relationship (Cloven & Rolloff, 1994). It would seem that if a respondent perceived his or her relational partner as having low commitment it would contribute to the chilling effect, but this may not always be the case (Cloven & Rolloff, 1993). While commitment level, or level of emotional involvement, does have an effect on what type of strategy is used in conflict situations, some people are prone to react regardless of commitment levels (Billingham & Sack, 1987). For instance, those who are likely to react with violence to a conflict tend to do so regardless of the state of the relationship, and for that reason low commitment levels may not induce a chilling effect (Billingham & Sack). For these reasons, research on relational alternatives and commitment levels warrants further examination in the framework of chilling effects.

Binge Drinking as a Catalyst

Binge drinking can become a norm for high school and college students (Bichler & Tibbets, 2003; Caldwell, 2002; Chassin, Pitts & Prost, 2002; Reifman, 2003). Students who tend to spend more time on campus, as opposed to going home every weekend, are more likely to binge drink, and it is more common for students in many colleges to stay on campus than to travel home (Reifman, 2003). In addition, those who participate in binge drinking have increased liking for and wanting of more alcohol, which is a possible explanation for the fact that 31% of college students have alcohol abuse problems ("Alcohol"; Palfai & Ostafin, 2003). Thus, alcohol

use is rampant on college campuses. This combination leads to continued alcohol abuse and attendant negative outcomes (Palfai & Ostafin, 2003; Reifman, 2003).

High levels of binge drinking may cause difficulties or irritations in students' interpersonal relationships that could lead to conflict. However, if partners withhold these irritations after an alcoholic episode it could lead to withholding of information in other aspects of the relationship. A chilling effect may occur if these irritations are not expressed because "a failure to address a partner's transgressions allows the perpetuation of dissatisfying and perhaps harmful relational circumstances" (Soloman & Samp, 1998, p. 207). Just as a conflict could be detrimental to the stability of the relationship, the chilling effect may be just as harmful.

Drinking alcohol in itself may not be a cause for conflict, but binge drinking can place relational partners in situations where they are out of control. One problem domain associated with binge drinking is verbal and physically aggressive behavior (Gruenewald, Johnson, Light, Lipton, & Saltz, 2003), which may not arise in relationships if alcohol consumption is limited. In the college setting, however, limiting alcoholic intake is difficult for several reasons. Many times individuals intend to have only one or two drinks in order to relax or celebrate after studying or completing assignments but find it difficult to stop drinking (Bichler & Tibbetts, 2003; Knapp, et al., 1986; Parker & Williams, 2003). According to Bichler and Tibbetts (2003), "about 41% of respondents reported being encouraged to drink by their friends" (p. 742). The pressure exerted by friends may increase the chances that a person will binge drink on a given night and, in turn, situations may become problematic.

Langley, Kypri and Stephenson (2003) label the negative experiences resulting from a partner's binge drinking as "secondhand effects." This could mean that the relational partner has to take care of their drunk partner, or that they will become involved in some sort of conflict. The binge drinking partner may make a regrettable comment, act in an embarrassing manner or purposely begin a conflict due to his or her inebriated state. The relational partner who did not drink, or did not drink as much, may feel powerless in these situations and prefer not to discuss the drunken event. This powerlessness may influence how the problem is gauged—either severe or not as severe (Solomon & Samp, 1998). Individuals uncertain of their partners' commitment levels tend to reduce the amount of severity assigned to the problem. Irritations during, or following, a binging episode may be withheld, either because the problem is not as severe, or because the partner who is not drunk does not view the episode as worth the cost of conflict. According to Solomon and Samp, "a partner's interpersonal power is reflected in both previous decisions to withhold complaints and the expectations people form about possible future problematic situations" (p. 204). This suggests that adjustments a partner makes to the evaluated severity of problems are not likely to be isolated events. Past adjustments will influence future ones and the chilling effect will continue to the detriment of the relationship.

Previous research has not examined the role alcohol can play in the chilling effect, however this lack of expressed grievance can readily be applied to binge drinking situations. Partners may not vocalize their irritations with a partner who binge drinks for fear of the potential aggressive repercussions (Gruenewald et al., 2003). As previously mentioned, the relational alternatives available to the partner and the commitment level may also contribute to the chilling effect (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). For that reason the first hypothesis is posited:

H1: Decisions to withhold information (chilling effects) will be positively related to binge drinking, commitment levels, and relational alternatives.

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Research on chilling effects has examined romantic relationships because these are interpersonal relationships with more stress than most platonic friendships (Roloff & Cloven, 1990). In the college lifestyle, however, friends tend to play as large a part in students' lives as their romantic partners; it has even been suggested that friendships are the most important relationships for college-aged individuals (Arnett, 2000). Also, friends are likely to be together in many situations where binge drinking takes place (Benton et al., 2003; Chassin et al., 2002; Reifman, 2003). Thus, it is possible for chilling effects to occur in friendships, but it is unclear whether these chilling effects will be as dramatic as in romantic relationships since the friendly relationship is not as committed. For this reason the first research question is:

RQ1: Does binge drinking influence decisions to withhold communication about problematic events in platonic friendships?

Finally, previous research has shown that sex may play a part in how a person responds to irritations (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). Women are more likely to recognize problems in the relationship and to provide more reasons to end a relationship than men (Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Solomon & Samp, 1998). In addition, women view hypothetical situations more severely than men, and when the severity is high the women tend to avoid communication pertaining to those situations. Men report binge drinking more than women, and this could result in the men enacting in more behaviors leading to chilling effects (Caldwell, 2002). This suggests men have a greater possibility to deliver regrettable messages and be involved in embarrassing events following binges, and women will be more likely to avoid discussing such situations with their partners. Due to these previous results concerning sex, the second hypothesis is:

H2: Women will be more likely to withhold communication about problematic events due to a partner's binge drinking than will men.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 317 undergraduate students recruited from an introductory level communication studies class at a large, mid-Atlantic university. One hundred and sixty participants were male students, and 151 were female students (six participants failed to report their sex). The average age of participants was 18.60 ($SD = 1.41$). One hundred and eighteen participants reported their relational partner as binge drinking less than once a week (37.2%), 51 participants reported their relational partner as binge drinking once a week (16.2%), 60 participants reported their relational partner as binge drinking twice a week (19.1%), 48 participants reported their relational partner as binge drinking three times a week (15.1%) and 30 participants reported their relational partner as binge drinking four or more times a week (9.1%). Ten participants did not report on their relational partners binge drinking. These averages are consistent with the national average (Kapner, 2003).

Prior to the distribution of the survey packets, the definition of a romantic relationship was given to the respondents. Following the descriptions of romantic relationships by Stein, Allen, and Hill (2003), romantic relationships were defined in this study as, "a dating relationship with intense feelings and emotions, accompanied with sexual relations, that is *typically* exclusive, but not in all circumstances." Platonic friendships were described as a friendship that was not characterized by dating and sexual relations. Due to the time lengths that may need to pass in order for a chilling effect to take place, the participants were told that no

romantic relationship shorter than a month was applicable for the study. To ensure anonymity, all participants were provided with a survey packet intended for those in romantic relationships ($n = 168$) and a survey packet intended for the platonic friendships ($n = 149$). Participants were instructed to complete only one survey and to turn the blank survey packet in along with the completed one.

Participants who reported on a romantic relationship completed measures of relational alternatives, commitment, withholding communication (i.e., the chilling effect), and binge drinking, in addition to demographic items. Participants who reported on a platonic relationship completed measures of withholding communication, and binge drinking, in addition to demographic items. Completion of the measures took approximately 15 minutes, and participants received minimal extra credit for their participation.

Measures

Relational alternatives were assessed using four items from Solomon and Samp (1998). Responses to the items were assessed with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. Sample items include: “My partner’s alternatives to our relationship are quite appealing,” and “If our relationship was to end today, it would be very easy for my partner to find a new relationship just as good or better.” Previous reliabilities obtained for this scale were $\alpha = .76$ (Solomon & Samp, 1998) and $\alpha = .70$ (Samp & Solomon, 2001). The reliability obtained in the present study was $.62$ ($M = 8.76$, $SD = 3.02$).

Commitment was assessed using four modified items taken from Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Gunn (1982). Modifications were consistent with previous research (Roloff & Cloven, 1990). The first item asked how long the relational partner would like the relationship to last, with responses ranging from (1) *a week or so* to (6) *a lifetime*. The second item asked the extent to which the relational partner is attached, with responses ranging from (1) *not at all* to (6) *extremely attached*. The third item asked how committed the relational partner is, with responses ranging from (1) *not at all* to (6) *extremely committed*. The fourth item asked the likelihood of the relational partner ending the relationship, with responses ranging from (1) *not likely at all* to (6) *extremely likely*. In a previous study, a reliability of $.84$ was obtained for these items (Roloff & Cloven). In the present study, the reliability was $.72$ ($M = 18.89$, $SD = 3.76$).

The likelihood of not communicating (i.e., the chilling effect) was assessed with six items (Samp & Solomon, 2001). Prior to completing these items, participants were instructed to think about a time when their relational partner binged on alcohol and conflict arose. Sample items include: “I would say something to my partner about this situation as soon as possible,” and “I would voice my opinion about this situation to my partner.” Responses to these items range from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. In a previous study, a reliability of $.82$ was obtained. In the present study, the reliability of this scale for participants reporting on a romantic relationship was $.85$ ($M = 17.14$, $SD = 2.71$) and $.89$ ($n = 149$, $M = 17.92$, $SD = 1.92$) for participants reporting on a platonic friendship.

Binge drinking was assessed with one item that asked the participants to report the number of times their relational partner (romantic or friend) binges on alcohol in an average week (Bichler & Tibbetts, 2003). The definition of binge drinking was provided in both versions of the survey packet. Responses to the item ranged from (1) *less than once a week* to (5) *four or more times a week* ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.38$). See Table 1 for distribution of drinking rates by relationship type.

Table 1 Drinking Rates by Relationship Type

Binging	Romantic	Platonic
Less than once a week	44% (74)	20% (44)
Once a week	14% (24)	18% (27)
Twice a week	18% (30)	20% (30)
Three times a week	13% (21)	18% (27)
Four or more times a week	6% (10)	14% (10)
Total participants	159	148

Note. Nine participants did not report drinking rates in the romantic category and one participant did not report drinking rates in the platonic category.

Results

The first hypothesis posited that the chilling effect would be correlated with binge drinking, commitment, and relational alternatives. Three Pearson correlations were conducted to test this hypothesis. This hypothesis was partially supported. Relational alternatives were positively correlated with the chilling effect, $r = .30, p < .01$. The more alternatives available to the relational partner, the more likely the chilling effect would occur. Commitment was negatively correlated with the chilling effect, $r = .41, p < .01$. The more committed the relational partners were to the relationship, the less likely the chilling effect would occur. Binge drinking was not correlated with the chilling effect, $r = .06, p > .05$.

The first research question asked whether binge drinking would induce a chilling effect in platonic friendships. Results from an analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated a significant difference in the chilling effect depending on the amount of times the platonic friend binged on alcohol, $F(4, 142), p < .001$. A Tukey post hoc analysis was conducted to further examine the difference between the binge drinking groups in the platonic friendships. Participants who reported their relational partner binge drinking less than once a week ($M = 22.89$) were significantly different from relational partners who binged once a week ($M = 17.70$). Participants who reported their relational partner binge drinking once a week were significantly different from relational partners who binged three times a week ($M = 23.85$). Therefore, participants who reported their relational partners as drinking three times a week were more likely to experience a chilling effect than partners who binged once a week. In addition, participants who reported their relational partner drinking three times a week were significantly different from relational partners who drank two times a week ($M = 19.73$). Therefore, participants who reported their relational partners as drinking three times a week were more likely to experience a chilling effect than partners who binged twice a week. All means and standard deviations for this post hoc analysis are included in Table 2.

Table 2
Platonic Relationship Binge Drinking Rates

Less than once a week	22.89	(5.60)
Once a week	17.70	(5.63)
Twice a week	19.73	(5.52)
Three times a week	23.85	(4.88)
Four times a week	20.60	(4.43)

The second hypothesis posited women would induce a chilling effect more often than men. Participants reporting on a platonic relationship were not included in this analysis because it was unclear whether the participants were reporting on a same-sex friendship or an opposite-sex friendship. Of the 168 participants reporting on a romantic relationship, 75 were men and 87 were women (six participants did not report sex). Results from a t-test indicated this hypothesis was not supported. No significant differences were found in chilling effects, between men ($m = 21.21$) and women ($m = 22.39$), $t(160) = -1.62$, $p > .05$.

Discussion

This study examined chilling effects in relationships after a negative situation occurs as a result of one's relational partner bingeing on alcohol. This study is unique in the examination of how alcohol can contribute to a chilling effect in interpersonal relationships. Chilling effects were found to be related to low commitment and high relational alternatives in romantic relationships. Chilling effects differ depending on binge drinking rates in platonic relationships, and males and females do not differ in their chilled responses. Chilling effects do exist in both romantic relationships and friendships, and although bingeing on alcohol was not a factor influencing chilling in romantic relationships, it did play a role in depressing complaints among friends.

In this study, commitment and relational alternatives contributed to the chilling effect. However, binge drinking did not contribute to withholding complaints among romantic partners. Previously, it has been suggested that the college participants would have more relational alternatives due to the concentrated number of similar people in one area. The implication was that the increased relational alternatives would lead to an even greater chilling effect. This assumption was supported in the present study. Although the relationship of commitment to chilling effects has been unclear in previous research, commitment in the present study was negatively associated with the chilling effect. Relational partners who perceive lower commitment levels in their relationship are less likely to express grievances. Refusing to express grievances may prevent conflict in the short-term, but it does not ensure this conflict will never

occur, nor does it aid the irritation the partner is experiencing. Individuals may believe they are aiding their relationships by refraining from nagging their relational partners (Soule, 2001), but the chilling effect that occurs in accordance with low commitment levels and high relational alternatives is not a constructive resolution to problems.

Analysis of hypothesis one failed to reveal an association between binge drinking and chilling effects in romantic relationships. However, chilling effects do exist in friendships, and are correlated with binge drinking. Because friendships typically do not become as committed or exclusive as romantic relationships, partners may not anticipate dealing with issues related to dependence power and withholding of grievances (Cloven & Roloff, 1994). However, results from the present study indicate that the effect is indeed operative in platonic relationships. The levels of chilling increased as frequency of bingeing increased, except for the first frequency (drinking less than once a week).

The second hypothesis examined sex differences and the chilling effect, finding males and females to be quite similar. This similarity between responses based on sex may be due to the fact that there were no relationships between the chilling effect and binge drinking in romantic relationships. For the platonic relationships, the similarity in responses may be due to recent trends. Men, and particularly white men, are the largest group of binge drinkers, which suggests men have the possibility of increasing their likelihood of enacting irritating behaviors, or embarrassing moments (Benton et al., 2004). In recent years, however, women have increased the amount of alcohol they consume, placing them in positions similar to men. Being on similar levels with excessive drinking may create empathy or a similar perspective, and be a reason for the lack of significant chilling effect differences between sexes.

Limitations

It should be recognized that measurement issues may have clouded some of the results in this study. An argument against using “binge drinking” as an assessment of negative consequences is that, in itself, counting binges may not accurately gauge the amount of alcohol consumption needed to reach the threshold of danger and problematic outcomes (Gruenewald, et al., 2003). Thus, accurately assessing the point at which alcohol-related problems arise may not be best understood by measuring the number of times a person binges on alcohol in a given time period.

Another limitation of the binge drinking measure was that it did not include an option for those who do not drink at all. This may have created a large, and discrepant, first category (drinking less than once a week), with a range of individuals who binge drink once every 10 days to those who have never had a drink in their life. It was found that those who reported their platonic friend as binge drinking once a week were less likely to withhold complaints than participants who reported their relational partner drinking *less* than once a week. This finding may have been the result of an item that failed to have equal distribution between categories. More significant differences might be apparent if a non-drinker option were included in the item.

Implications

The implications of this study include the possibility of other variables involved in chilling effects, and particularly analysis of a chilling effect in friendships. Overuse of alcohol is common on college campuses (Gruenewald et al., 2003). The discovery of binge drinking’s

association with chilling effects in friendships, which are detrimental to relationships, could be a further reason to promote responsible alcohol consumption. College campuses, as well as public service announcements, often delineate the school problems and driving hazards associated with binge drinking, but it may also be advantageous to alert students to the relational dangers of bingeing on alcohol.

In addition to the aforementioned applications, the results also add the recognition of the chilling effect in friendships. Romantic relationships are studied for the ways to engage in constructive conflict, or to evaluate the negative aspects of conflict, but there has been less research on conflict in platonic friendships (Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Solomon & Samp, 1998). The finding that chilling effects associated with binge drinking were more likely among platonic relationships than among romantic may also suggest an ability to circumvent interaction with a friend that is not possible with romantic partners. In other words, the exclusivity of romantic relationships, and their perceived importance in our society, creates more pressure to address issues. In contrast, platonic friends may have more alternative outlets for interaction, and hence not feel the need to directly discuss problematic behavior with that partner. Such avoidance and communication through alternate channels has implications for the growth of friendships, as well as for conflict management.

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