Normative misperceptions about alcohol use in the general population of drinkers

Claire Garnett, David Crane, Robert West, Susan Michie, Jamie Brown & Adam Winstock

Research Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, UCL; Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Research Centre, UCL; Institute of Psychiatry, National Addiction Centre, KCL; South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, KCL

Introduction

- Normative misperception about alcohol use refers to the underestimation of one’s own alcohol consumption relative to other people
- Removing this misperception has been found to reduce subsequent alcohol use in a number of studies.
- Research has been limited to college and university students or heavy drinkers, and has not looked at what factors may underlie them.

Research questions

1) What is the prevalence of normative misperceptions about alcohol use in the general population of alcohol users from the UK, US, Australia & Canada?
2) To what extent are normative misperceptions about alcohol use associated with a range of socio-demographic and drinking variables?

Method

- Cross-sectional online survey
  - Conducted globally
  - Drawing on data from UK, US, Australia & Canada
- Participants
  - n= 9,820
  - Aged 18+
  - Consumed alcohol in last year
- Measures
  - 10-item AUDIT questionnaire
    - Assessed alcohol consumption, harmful drinking & alcohol dependence
  - Socio-demographic assessment
  - Question assessing beliefs about how one’s drinking compares with others
- Associations were analysed by linear regression models.

Results

High prevalence of normative misperceptions in the general population of drinkers

- Mean normative misperception score = 0.2 (SD=1.85)
- Significantly greater than 0 (t(9819)=10.443, p<0.001)
- Nearly half (46.9%) of drinkers underestimated the proportion of other people who consume less alcohol than them.

A number of socio-demographic and drinking variables associated with a larger normative misperception:

- Younger (16-24): p<0.003
- Male: p<0.001
- From the UK (vs the US): p<0.001
- Without (vs with) post-16 qualifications: p=0.003
- White: p=0.035
- Unemployed (vs employed): p<0.001
- At higher levels of alcohol-related risk: p<0.001

Conclusions

- Substantial minority of harmful drinkers believe their alcohol consumption to be at or below average
- Underestimation of one’s own alcohol consumption relative to others is common in the general population of drinkers
- This normative misperception is greater in those who are younger, male, less well educated, unemployed, white, from the UK, and high-risk drinkers.

Future research:

- Examine whether there is more impact for interventions targeted at individuals with the socio-demographic and drinking variables associated with normative misperceptions
- Targeted interventions could potentially enhance the effectiveness of population wide health strategies to reduce alcohol consumption and misuse.

References