

Studies Documenting Misperceptions

False consensus and pluralistic ignorance misperceptions have been documented in over fifty-five published studies. Alcohol use misperceptions have been found in studies with small samples of college students from an individual campus, in larger surveys of individual campus populations, and in multiple campus studies (see Table One for a listing of these studies) and among high school and middle school students. Some of these studies are discussed in recent reviews by Berkowitz (2004), Perkins (2002, 2003a) and by Borsari and Carey (2001, 2003).

Table One – Campus Studies Documenting Misperceptions of Alcohol

Individual Studies (Small Samples, n < 500)

Baer, 1994
Baer, Stacy & Larimer, 1991
Baer & Carney, 1993
Bourgeois & Bowen, 2001
Carter & Kahnweiler, 2000
Clapp & McDonnell 2000
Clapp et al, 2003
Collins et al, 2002
Lewis & Neighbors, forthcoming
Ott & Haertlein, 2002
Peeler et al, 2000
Prentice & Miller, 1993
Schroeder & Prentice, 1998
Sher et al 2001
Steffian, 1999
Thombs, 2000

Individual Studies Large (Large Samples)

Agostinelli & Miller, 1994
Agostinelli, Brown & Miller 1995
Barnett et. al. 1996
Berkley-Patton et al, 2003
Burrell, 1992
Campo et al 2003
Fabiano, 2003
Glider et al, 2001
Gomberg et al, 2001

Foss et al, 2003
Haines & Spear, 1996
Jeffrey et. al. 2003
Korcuska & Thombs, 2003
Kypri & Langley, 2003
Page, Scanlan & Gilbert, 1999
Suls & Green, 2003
Thombs, 1999
Thombs et. al. 1997
Perkins, 1985, 1987
Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986
Perkins & Craig, 2003a
Werch et. al, 2000

Multi-Campus Studies

Perkins et. al., 1999
Pollard et al, 2000
Perkins & Wechsler, 1996
Trochel et al, 2003

Borsari and Carey (2003) describe the evidence for misperceptions using data from 23 studies in a meta-analysis of the influence of misperceptions on behavior. They conducted 102 tests for misperceptions using data from the 23 studies and found that 91% revealed a positive “self-other discrepancy.” They concluded that “there appears to be substantial evidence supporting the existence of self-other norm discrepancy in perceptions of alcohol use among college students.”

Studies find that misperceptions of alcohol use are held by all members of campus communities including undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff, students and student leaders (Berkowitz, 1997, Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986b; University of Michigan, 1993). They have been documented in a statewide sample of young adults both in college and not in college (Linkenbach & Perkins, 2003b), and among middle and high-school students (Beck & Trieman, 1996; Botvin et al, 2001; D’Amico et al, 2001; Haines, Barker & Rice, 2003; Perkins & Craig, 2003b; Rice, 2003; Thombs, et al, 1997). In addition, Thombs et. al. (1997) reported misperceptions about DWI (driving while intoxicated) and RWID (riding with someone who is intoxicated).

Other studies have reported misperceptions about cigarette smoking (Haines, Barker & Rice, 2003; Hancock & Henry, 2003; Linkenbach & Perkins, 2003a; Perkins & Craig, 2003b) and about marijuana and other illegal drug use (Hansen & Graham, 1991; Perkins, 1985; Perkins &

Craig, 2003B; Perkins et al, 1999; Pollard et al, 2000; Wolfson, 2000). In addition to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, misperceptions have been documented about gambling (Larimer & Neighbors, 2003) and bullying behavior (Biggsby, 2002). Misperceptions of homophobia, attitudes about sexual assault, and eating behaviors are reviewed by Berkowitz (2003b) and cited later in this paper. There are also over fifteen studies of pluralistic ignorance documenting misperceptions for topics such as White's attitudes towards desegregation, participation in gang behavior, and the extent of student radicalism (see Miller and McFarland, 1991 and Toch & Klofas, 1984 for reviews of this literature). Finally, Kypri and Langley (2003) documented patterns of misperceptions for alcohol use in a sample of New Zealand student that replicates results of social norms research conducted in the United States.

Misperceptions are formed when a minority of individuals are observed engaging in highly visible problem behavior (such as public drunkenness or smoking) and when this extreme behavior is remembered more than responsible behavior that is more common but less visible (Perkins, 1997). These misperceptions are assumed to be normative and may be spread further in "public conversation" by community members who act as "carriers of the misperception," including those who don't engage in the behavior (Perkins, 1997).

Research suggests that the meaning and extent of these misperceptions may vary among individuals with different drinking styles (Pollard, et. al, 2000). While Werch and his colleagues (2000) suggested that correcting misperceptions may have different effects on individuals at different stages of change, Steinman (2003) found that the misperceptions reported by individuals at different stages of change were mostly similar.

There is only one published study that calls into question the existence of misperceptions. Wechsler & Kuo (2000) claimed that students accurately perceive campus norms for drinking. A number of authors have questioned their conclusion, including Borsari and Carey (2003) and DeJong (2000), who point out a number of problems with methodology and definitions.

Thus, with only one exception that has serious methodological flaws, misperceptions have been consistently documented for a variety of behaviors and social contexts and in a variety of student and adult populations and sub-populations in both individual studies and in meta-analyses.