The Drunken Idiot Bias: Consuming Alcohol Can Reduce Perceived Intelligence

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Consuming alcohol can reduce the perceived intelligence of the person consuming it, in the absence of any actual reduction in cognitive performance, a mistake we term the 'drunken idiot' bias. Candidates who consume alcohol in interviews held over dinner are perceived as less hireable. Candidates do not anticipate the bias.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
What we consume often conveys information about who we are. Consumers often select products to signal favorable aspects of their identity (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007). Additionally, observers often infer aspects of a target’s personality based on what the target chooses to consume (Calder and Burnkrant 1977). These inferences are not totally unfounded: observers can often draw reasonably accurate personality inferences based on possessions (Gosling 2008).

Intelligence, in particular, can often be accurately estimated based on minimal cues (Borkenau and Liebler 1993). However, irrelevant cues, such as warmth (Cuddy 2009; Fiske et al. 2002), can bias perceptions of intelligence and competence. We examine whether a different cue—alcohol consumption—is treated as diagnostic of intelligence even when it is not.

Specifically, we experimentally examine whether consuming alcohol can reduce the perceived intelligence of the person consuming it, in the absence of any actual reduction in cognitive performance, a mistake we term the ‘drunken idiot’ bias. In order to detect a drunken idiot bias, we experimentally unconfounded alcohol consumption and cognitive performance. That is, we manipulate whether confederates appear to be consuming alcohol, but hold their cognitive performance constant across conditions. Any difference in perceived intelligence across conditions is a mistake attributable to the observation of alcohol consumption.

We hypothesize that the drunken idiot bias is a misapplication (or more specifically, an over-application) of a heuristic or ‘lay theory’ that is grounded in reality and often correct. At sufficiently large doses, alcohol impairs attention, general cognitive functioning, and short-term memory, particularly on the ascending limb of the blood alcohol curve (e.g., Jones and Vega 1972; Steele and Josephs 1990).

Because alcohol consumption and diminished cognitive performance frequently co-occur, we anticipate that observing alcohol consumption will increase the accessibility of the concept of diminished intelligence, which will in turn color perceptions of people of ambiguous intellect. The prediction is based largely on semantic network models of memory, which posit that concepts that co-occur frequently (e.g., tiger and stripes) are stored close to one another in memory. When one concept is activated, closely related concepts tend to become more accessible via a spreading activation process (Collins and Loftus 1975). Concepts or categories that are particularly accessible tend to act as lenses through which ambiguous stimuli are subsequently perceived (e.g., Higgins, Rholes, and Jones 1977).

Thus, we predict that observing alcohol consumption will bring to mind the concept of diminished intelligence, which will in turn color perceptions of people of ambiguous intellect. We utilized four experiments to examine whether the drunken idiot bias exists, to explore its implications, and to rule out alternative explanations. In Experiment 1A, participants evaluated photographs of confederates either holding a beer or holding no drink. Confederates were perceived as significantly less intelligent when holding a beer, but no less likeable, suggesting alcohol selectively reduces perceived intelligence.

To control for the act of consumption, and to examine whether the bias generalizes across different types of alcohol, Experiment 1B elicited perceptions of a confederate drinking wine, Coke, or nothing. Consistent with Experiment 1A, confederates were perceived as significantly less intelligent when consuming wine than when consuming soda or when consuming nothing.

Because the judgments in Experiment 1 were made in the absence of context, it is difficult to definitively determine whether observers were actually making a “mistake.” Additionally, it is difficult to determine whether people believe that consuming alcohol leads to diminished intelligence or whether people believe diminished intelligence leads to the selection of alcohol (or perhaps both).

Experiment 2 addressed these limitations by utilizing confederates who were actually attempting to make intelligent, persuasive arguments, and by manipulating whether confederates chose their own beverage or had it selected for them. Specifically, a confederate made videotaped arguments in favor of comprehensive exams for undergraduates while drinking either Coke or a beer. We also varied whether participants believed that the confederate chose their own drink, or whether the experimenter selected the drink. Confederates were perceived as significantly less intelligent and persuasive when they were consuming alcohol, regardless of whether they chose to consume it. The results suggest that the bias results from the over-application of a heuristic suggesting that consuming alcohol diminishes cognitive performance.

We next explored whether the drunken idiot bias could have important professional consequences. In Experiment 3, real-world managers viewed a hypothetical job interview held over dinner and evaluated the hireability and intelligence of the candidate. We manipulated the drinks ordered by the candidate (wine or soda) and the manager (wine or soda). The real-world managers viewed candidates as significantly less intelligent and hireable when consuming alcohol than when consuming soda, even when the manager was also drinking alcohol.

Participants in Experiments 1-3 were sober, but typically evaluations of people drinking alcohol will be made by evaluators who are themselves drinking alcohol. Because people who are not currently drinking alcohol may fail to understand how they would view the world when they are drinking (cf. Loewenstein 1996), in Experiment 4 mildly intoxicated MBA students, playing the role of bosses, interviewed job candidates (confederates) who were either drinking alcohol or soda. Consistent with Experiments 1-3, candidates were viewed as significantly less intelligent and hireable when consuming alcohol than when consuming soda, even when the manager was also drinking alcohol.

Experiment 5 examined whether people in a position to be evaluated anticipate the drunken idiot bias. Specifically, we presented MBA students about to go on the job market with a hypothetical job interview that manipulated the boss’s drink choice (alcohol, soda, or unknown). Participants were then asked what they would order if they were the job candidate. If prospective candidates anticipate the drunken idiot bias, we should observe minimal selection of alcohol across conditions. Instead, one-quarter of participants ordered alcohol when the boss’s drink choice was unknown, and this figure nearly tripled when the boss ordered alcohol first. Thus, candidates generally do not appear to anticipate the drunken idiot bias.

REFERENCES


