Alcohol and behavioral dysregulation: ERP evidence of failures in cognitive control

John J. Curtin, Daniel A. Green & Bradley A. Fairchild

Abstract

Many current theories highlight the role of cognitive deficits in understanding the connection between drinking and important psychosocial phenomena (e.g., sexual and aggressive behavior). In particular, it appears that intoxicated individuals have difficulty executing effortful, attention limited, cognitive control required to inhibit dominant responses. The current project investigated alcohol effects on task performance when an incompatible, dominant response is concurrently activated. Event related potential (ERP) indices of cognitive processing were measured to connect behavior to underlying cognitive processes/systems. Specifically, examination of Error Related Negativity (ERN), an electrophysiological index of a neural system central to current theories of cognitive control, was a focus.

Participants received either alcohol (Target BAL: 0.08g/100ml) or no alcohol. They performed a modified version of the Eriksen Flanker task. Each trial consisted of a string of 5 letters (H's and S's). Participants made forced choice responses to indicate the identity of the center target letter (H or S) while ignoring flanker letters surrounding the target. Flankers were compatible (match target; e.g: HHHHH) or incompatible (mismatch target; e.g: SSHSS), with compatible/incompatible trials equi-probable. A dominant response was established by manipulating target letter frequency with one response more probable (p=.80) than the other (p=.20).

Behavioral results revealed that beverage condition interacted with target frequency such that intoxicated participants' impairment on infrequent target trials increased over time. This suggests that the deficit resulted from conflict with the frequent target response, which became increasingly potent through repeated execution across trials. Alcohol produced a sizeable reduction in ERN, indicating that impairment in performance of the non-dominant response resulted from alcohol-induced deficits in the cognitive system responsible for initiating the controlled, attentional processing required in this context.

Methodology

Participants

48 social drinkers (24 male/24 female) assigned to 2 beverage groups

- Alcohol (peak blood alcohol level of 0.080 g/100 ml)
- No-Alcohol

Description of Modified Flanker Task

- Stimuli are: HHHHH SSHSS SSSSS HHSHH
- Stimuli presented for 500ms with 1500-2500ms ISI
- 400 trials (4 blocks of 100) with break after two blocks

- Participants were instructed to:
  - ✓ Press button (left or right) to indicate *Target* (center) letter
  - ✓ Ignore surrounding *Flanker* letters

Independent Variables

- **Flanker compatibility**: Flanker letters were either congruent (HHHHH or SSSSS) or incongruent (HHSHH or SSHSS) with target letter. Congruent and incongruent flankers were equi-probable.

- **Target frequency**: The relative frequency of the two target letters was varied to establish a pre-potent response tendency. One target was frequent (80% of trials). The other was infrequent (20% of trials).

- **Block**: Participants completed 4 blocks of trials. A break was provided after the second block. It was expected that the pre-potent response tendency would increase over blocks

Dependent Variables

- **Response time (RT)**: Behavioral impairment was examined by recording response time on correct trials.

- **Error related negativity (ERN)**: ERN is a negative-going component of the response locked ERP waveform that is observed approximately 60 ms post response. ERN was quantified as the minimum deflection in the ERP waveform in a window from 0-125 ms post response. Recent research suggests that the neural generator of ERN is Anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and activity in this system represents the neural signal for the need for regulative controlled processing.

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Behavioral Effects

Response time (RT) was analyzed within a repeated measures ANOVA with Beverage as a between subject factor and Flanker Compatibility, Target Frequency, and Block as within subject factors.

Main Effects

- A main effect of Flanker Compatibility was observed ($p < .001$), with slower RT on incongruent trials.
- A main effect of Target Frequency was observed ($p < .001$), with slower RT on trials involving the infrequent target
- A main effect of Block was observed ($p = .035$). Follow-up polynomial contrasts revealed a significant cubic contrast ($p = .012$), which reflects a fatigue effect. Participants' RT increased from B1 to B2, reduced in B3 after the break, and increased again in B4.
- No significant main effect of alcohol was observed on RT ($p = .571$)

Interactions involving Beverage

Flanker Compatibility

- Neither the Beverage X Flanker Compatibility ($p = .992$) nor the Beverage X Flanker Compatibility X Block ($p = .955$) interactions were significant.

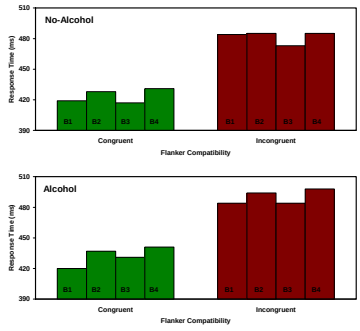
- This indicates that alcohol did not exacerbate the behavioral impairment produced by incompatible flankers.

Target Frequency

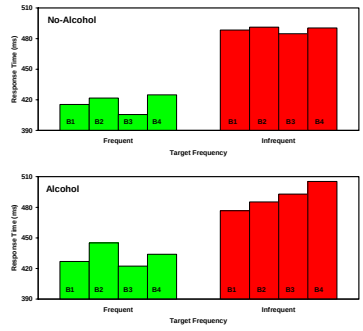
- A significant Beverage X Target Frequency X Block interaction was observed ($p=.013$).
- Within beverage group follow-up analysis revealed only significant Target Frequency ($p< .001$) and trend level cubic Block ($p=.066$) effects for the no alcohol group.
- In contrast, a significant Target Frequency X Block interaction ($p=.002$) was observed for the alcohol group.
  - Further decomposition demonstrated only the significant cubic Block effect ($p< .001$) for hi frequency stimuli.
  - However, for low frequency stimuli, a significant linear Block effect ($p=.037$) was observed.

- There results suggest that intoxicated participants displayed increasing difficulty over time executing the infrequent response as the strength of the competing frequent response became increasingly stronger due to repeated execution.

Flanker Compatibility Effects



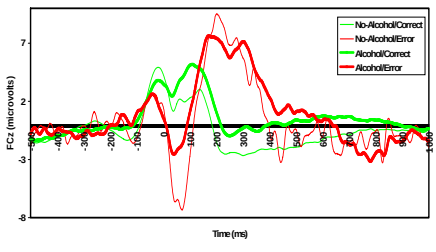
Target Frequency Effects

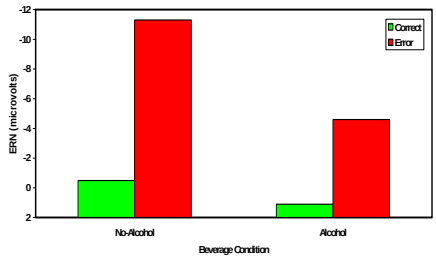


Error Related Negativity (ERN)

Error related negativity was analyzed within a repeated measures ANOVA with Beverage as a between subject variable and Accuracy (correct vs. error trials) as within subject variable

A significant Beverage X Accuracy interaction was observed ($p=.008$). Follow-up simple beverage contrasts indicated that ERN on error trials was significantly reduced for intoxicated relative to non-intoxicated participants ($p<.001$).





Conclusions

- Alcohol did not produce overall impaired performance. Instead, it selectively interfered with one aspect of task performance. Specifically, it interfered with the ability to execute the relatively weaker response option. As the discrepancy in the response strength of the two response options grew over the course of the experiment due to repeated execution of primarily one response, intoxicated participants displayed increasingly slower response on trials involving the other, more infrequent target stimulus. No such increase in impairment was observed among sober participants.

- In contrast to the target frequency interaction, alcohol did not impair (or enhance) individuals ability to selectively attend to target letters and ignore flankers. This suggests the need to examine the unitary nature of the attention construct as it is utilized in current theories about intoxicated behavior and to begin to entertain recent cognitive neuroscience theory which highlights the existence of multiple attentional systems.

- Alcohol significantly reduced ERN, a eletrophysiological index of the neural signal for the need for cognitive control. This effect suggests that intoxicated participants may fail to bring online the controlled processing resources necessary to inhibit prepotent response tendencies in favor of more adaptive, contextually appropriate response. Instead, intoxicated participants appear to be stimulus driven, relying more extensively on strength of stimulus-response association to guide behavior.