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Do Alcoholics Know What They're Doing? Identifications of the Act of Drinking

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Action identification theory holds that people may understand the same behavior in different ways. An action performed poorly or with hesitation is usually identified in terms of its mechanical details, whereas one performed more fluidly is understood in terms of its more meaningful consequences. This study demonstrates this phenomenon in the case of drinking alcohol. Inexperienced drinkers were inclined to identify the consumption of an alcoholic beverage as "swallowing," "lifting a glass," or the like, whereas frequent drinkers and alcoholics eschewed such identities and focused instead on identities such as "relieving tension," "overcoming boredom," or "hurting myself". If people initiate and regulate an action with reference to their preferred identifications for it, these results indicate that very different styles of self-regulation may characterize inexperienced and overindulgent people. The inexperienced person has conscious access to the details of the action, and so can regulate its performance moment by moment. The person who has difficulty controlling a behavior, in turn, may fail to suppress it during its performance because the behavior is known by a more encompassing identity, one that is completed only when the action as a whole is complete.

When people behave in an obviously misguided way, it is common to say that they do not know what they are doing. This observation must be a

compelling one, for many psychological theorists considering the origins of self-control problems have adopted the same line of interpretation. Viewing people who perform behaviors that are decidedly maladaptive, they have assumed that the people do not know what they are doing, and so have looked primarily to nonconscious processes for the sources of behavior pathology. This approach has left the individual's conscious knowledge of disordered behavior largely unexplored. No one has asked people who engage in problem behaviors an obvious question: What do you think you're doing?

Much might be learned from answers to such a question. According to the theory of action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986), people always have some understanding of what they are doing, no matter how peculiar the action may be, and this understanding exerts a critical guiding influence on the course of the action. For our research, we were led by this theory to expect that certain differences in action identification would arise between individuals who engage in an action to excess and individuals who perform the action more moderately. The action examined here was one for which excessive performance can be problematic indeed—drinking alcohol. To introduce our expectations regarding the ways in which people may differ in identifying this behavior, we begin with an overview of the theoretical framework.

The theory of action identification holds that people know what they are doing. The conceptions of an action that people endorse may be incomplete, and they may change over time, but they allow the behaviors of everyday life always to be known—in at least some way—in advance of their occurrence. In one sense, this idea is little more than a recognition that people find it easy to respond sensibly when they are asked what they are doing. In another sense, however, this idea encompasses the essence of a model of the mental control of action. Along with the early theories of James (1980), Luria (1961), and Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1960), and the more recent proposals by Carver and Scheier (1981) and Meichenbaum (1976), we suggest that mental representations accompany all action, serve to instigate the action in a particular direction, and are used as points of reference for the continued maintenance of the action.

This analysis differs from that of previous commentators, however, in that it incorporates the possibility that conscious mental representations of action vary along an important dimension—their level in a cognitive hierarchy of action identifications. We suggest that although people may indeed volunteer many different identifications of an action when they are encouraged to reflect, their more typical tendency is to think about an action in terms of only one identification nested in a cognitive hierarchy of possible identifications. In this view, the person's single prepotent identification of an act could range from a low-level detail of action to a high-

level meaning of action. The act of drinking, for instance, can be identified in many ways: "lifting a glass," "swallowing," "relieving tension," "overcoming boredom," "hurting myself," and, of course, "drinking." Certain of these identities are lower in level than others because they indicate how the others are done (e.g., "lifting a glass" and "swallowing" are lower in level than "drinking"). Those identities that are higher in level, in turn, convey why or with what effect the lower level identities are done; so, not only is "drinking" higher in level than "swallowing," but "relieving tension" and "overcoming boredom" are higher in level than "drinking." In general, an identity A is higher in level than an identity B if it makes sense to say that one does A *by* B (e.g., one "drinks" by "swallowing").

People commonly set out to engage in action that is identified at some level, but their level of identification may change under certain conditions. If they become aware of a higher level identity, for example, they will typically adopt it. This occurs because people generally prefer to know their actions in the most comprehensive and meaningful way. When someone "wins a lottery" by "buying a ticket," after all, it would be hard to convince that person that all he or she did was buy the ticket. The higher level identities of action communicate the consequences of the action more fully, and so provide a more meaningful portrayal of what is done. It is not always possible, however, to understand action at high levels. The person who sets out from Texas to "drive to Chicago," for instance, may often have to think about the details of the act along the way. At times, the person may be thinking only of "finding a gas station." Many of the high-level identities one may set out to enact cannot be performed in their entirety merely by virtue of an initial intent. One loses track of how the act can be completed, and low-level identities must come to mind to supply this missing knowledge.

The theory can be summarized, then, with these principles: (a) An action is maintained in terms of its prepotent identity; (b) when an action can be identified at both a higher and a lower level, the higher level identity will become prepotent; and (c) when an action cannot be maintained in terms of its prepotent identity, a lower level identity will become prepotent. Evidence for each of these ideas has been found in several studies (e.g., Vallacher, Wegner, & Frederick, 1987; Wegner, Vallacher, Kiersted, & Dizadji, 1986; Wegner, Vallacher, Macomber, Wood, & Arps, 1984).

The cognitive processes underlying the self-control of addictive behaviors can be understood through this theory. Now, it has long been known that as people practice an easy, potentially fluid action, its performance becomes more coordinated, automatic, and independent of conscious attention (e.g., Bruner, 1970; Bryan & Harter, 1899; Fitts & Posner, 1967; Weiss, 1939). We believe that the identification of the action changes as well, from low-level identities used to piece the action together when it is

unfamiliar, to high-level identities used to conceptualize the action once it is well learned. This idea can be derived from the principles of the theory. In essence, the novice at an action is moved by frequent failure in maintaining higher level identities toward low-level identification. With increasing experience, however, the action becomes more automatic and thus can be maintained at higher levels of identification. The press toward higher level identification can come forward, then, to allow the person to grasp and hold a higher level meaning of the act. As the person gains facility with the action, therefore, there should be a tendency to abandon concern with the action's details and to embrace instead a particular high-level understanding that captures best for the person the overall meaning of the act.

A behavior such as "alcohol drinking," of course, is one that can be mastered by most everyone. One group of college-student subjects viewed it as easier than 21 of 25 everyday actions they rated (Wegner & Vallacher, 1983). By our theoretical account, then, people identifying this action should, in large part, emphasize the high-level consequences of the act and not the low-level details. In combination with this general propensity, however, the theory also suggests that individual variation in identification level might be discovered. People who are not strongly involved with the action, who are not fluid in its performance, or who undertake it relatively infrequently, should exhibit vestiges of low-level identification. So, as compared to individuals who drink more frequently, hesitant drinkers should display more concern with "lifting a glass," and the like, concentrating on the details of alcohol consumption.

At the opposing extreme are people who perform the action to excess. The theory indicates that these people should show a reduced concern with the low-level identification of the action, tending instead toward high-level identification of the act. We suspect that the nature of the particular high-level identification adopted by experienced drinkers would differ, however, depending on the actual consequences of drinking they have experienced. Thus, for example, although a moderate drinker might identify drinking by reference to its positive consequences—relaxation, thirst reduction, and the like—the alcoholic, having experienced more severe consequences of drinking (e.g., social disapproval, loss of a job, etc.), might identify the act in such terms. Once one has experienced some of the more tragic consequences of drinking, one would tend to identify the action with reference to these.

Action identification theory makes a further suggestion about the self-control of drinking: The meanings derived from experience with an act may contribute to the action's immunity to control attempts. We believe that high-level identifications might serve to vitiate people's attempts to control their problem behaviors. This could occur because thinking about

an action at high level may preclude self-control of the lower level details of the action. The person who thinks about "drinking" through details such as "lifting a glass," "swallowing," and the like, can monitor an episode of "drinking" in relatively short segments of action. Having "swallowed," such a person may now decide what to do next. "Drinking" could continue, or it could stop. The person who understands "drinking" at high level, however, may monitor only rather global act products like "relieving tension," "overcoming boredom," or even "hurting myself," and may therefore continue to drink—without thinking about details of the action—until the high-level act identity is done. Identifying the action at high levels, then, may make the action more stable, precluding for the duration of the action any attempts to regulate its performance.

This study represents a first step toward the examination of this theoretical reasoning. Our concern here was with the assessment of action identification tendencies among people for whom the action of "drinking alcohol" is conducted normally or is a problem of self-control. We expected that individuals who engage in the action with low frequency, as compared with those who indulge more frequently, would exhibit enhanced lower level identification of the action. Although a general trend was expected toward high-level identifications among the more indulgent individuals, we did not anticipate that all possible high-level identities would operate in this way. Because actions may have different consequences when they are performed to different degrees, we expected the appreciation of such consequences to be represented in differing high-level meanings of the action endorsed by the moderately indulgent and overindulgent respondents.

METHOD

Subjects

The subject samples for this study were 94 Trinity University students (68 women and 26 men) and 87 inpatients (34 women and 53 men) of the Chicago Alcohol Treatment Center (CATC). The Trinity sample consisted of college undergraduates (age $M = 20.29$) with varying levels of experience with alcohol, all of whom were of legal drinking age at the time the research was conducted. The CATC sample consisted of inpatients (age $M = 37.05$) with a chronic alcohol problem. These individuals were admitted to the CATC on the basis of the following criteria: (a) attempts to stop drinking had been made and were not successful, (b) alcohol use had affected a significant area of life, (c) blackouts were experienced, (d) a loss of control during alcohol use was experienced, and (e) the person had lost his or her job as the result of alcohol problems.

Measures

The action identification questionnaire was constructed through a free-response action identification technique. Fifteen subjects with widely varying alcohol experience were asked to indicate in as many ways as they could: "what one does in drinking alcoholic beverages." The 50 most frequently mentioned identities were then translated into a standard form, the gerund phrase, and were included in the final questionnaire. Instructions for this questionnaire asked respondents to rate each identity on a 1- to 7-point scale according to how well it described the act of "drinking alcoholic beverages."

Respondents at Trinity also filled out an alcohol-use questionnaire. This questionnaire resulted from the factor analysis of a larger questionnaire administered to an earlier sample, exhibited satisfactory reliability in this sample ($\alpha = .78$), and contained 6 items. These were: (a) the number of different kinds of alcoholic beverage used (12 categories of such beverage were provided), (b) the number of days in which alcohol is consumed in a typical week (from 0 to 7), (c) the number of drinks likely to be consumed at a party (from 0 to 6+), (d) whether drinking had ever been continued to the point of illness (yes or no), (e) self-rated drinking experience (on a scale from 1 to 7), and (f) self-rated enjoyment of the taste of alcohol (also on a 1- to 7-point scale). Standardized scores on these items were summed to yield an overall alcohol-use index.

RESULTS

Act Identity Factor Analysis

A principal axis factor analysis with equimax rotation was performed on the identity ratings. This analysis revealed six factors with eigenvalues over 1.0 that together accounted for 59% of the variance in ratings. A .35 loading criterion was used to assign identities to factors; the four identities with loadings above criterion on more than one factor were assigned to the factor with the higher loading. The factors (shown in Table 1) included one relevant to low-level identification and several tapping high-level identifications. The higher level factors were named "hurting myself," "relieving tension," "overcoming boredom," "getting drunk," and "rewarding myself." We derived an index for each factor by summing subjects' ratings of identities loaded above criterion on that factor. The mean reliability (Cronbach's α) for these factor indexes was .81, with a range of .74 to .91.

TABLE 1
Identity Factors for "Drinking Alcoholic Beverages"

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Loading</i>	<i>Identity</i>
1. Low Level	.81	lifting a glass
	.77	touching a glass to my lips
	.71	swallowing liquid
	.71	holding a liquid in my mouth
	.64	drinking from a glass
	.61	drinking by swallowing liquid
	.57	experiencing wetness in my mouth
	.48	holding a glass in my hand
	.39	experiencing a taste
2. "Hurting Myself"	.76	letting myself down
	.61	demonstrating a lack of self-control
	.59	letting myself down by drinking
	.53	experiencing shame
	.51	causing damage to my health
	.44	disappointing my friends
	.42	acting out of habit
3. "Relieving Tension"	.39	making myself withdrawn
	.88	relieving tension by drinking
	.61	relieving tension
4. "Overcoming Boredom"	.43	getting my mind off my problems
	.57	overcoming boredom by drinking
	.48	satisfying my needs
	.42	passing time
5. "Getting Drunk"	.40	following my impulses
	.70	getting drunk
	.56	drinking too much
	.43	joining in with others who are drinking
6. "Rewarding Myself"	.36	getting in a good mood
	.80	rewarding myself
	.69	rewarding myself by drinking
	.51	demonstrating my good taste
	.40	getting myself energized
	.36	clearing my mind
	.36	enjoying myself

Act Identities and Alcohol Use

Our analyses of the relationship between action identification and alcohol use began with partitioning the Trinity student sample into low- ($n = 30$), moderate- ($n = 33$), and heavy- ($n = 34$) use groups according to scores on the self-report alcohol-use index. The CATC sample was then considered a fourth (very heavy use) group for inclusion in analyses of variance of the effect of alcohol use group on the action identification factor indexes.

TABLE 2
Act Identity Indexes by Alcohol Use Group

Identity Index	Alcohol Use Group			
	Low-Use Students	Moderate-Use Students	Heavy-Use Students	CATC Clients
Low Level	43.45 _a	40.35 _a	33.70 _b	30.31 _b
"Hurting Myself"	23.37 _a	19.06 _a	19.02 _a	33.20 _b
"Relieving Tension"	10.51 _a	13.04	14.19 _b	13.90 _b
"Overcoming Boredom"	13.71	13.11 _a	14.51	16.33 _b
"Getting Drunk"	16.38 _a	17.63	19.89 _b	18.41
"Rewarding Myself"	19.68	21.82	23.86 _a	17.66 _b

Note. Index means are adjusted for covariation of sex, age, and total identification. Means with different subscripts in a row are significantly different by Newman-Keuls test, $p < .05$.

Age, sex, and a total action identification score were used as covariates in these analyses because in preliminary regression analyses, these variables had some significant effects on action identification indexes within groups. The total action identification score consisted of the sum of a subject's ratings on all action identification items (both those on factors and the others). This score increased reliably across the four alcohol-use groups, indicating that people who perform the act with greater frequency are more willing to identify it in all ways, $F(3, 177) = 60.08, p < .001$. Although it is of some interest to note that people who perform this action are generally more inclined to imbue it with meaning, it is more important to observe that this is a response bias that can obscure variations in the differential identification of the action (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). Entering total identification as a covariate in these analyses adjusts all factor indexes to eliminate this problem. Adjusted group means for the six factor indexes are shown in Table 2.

The low-level identification index declined significantly across the four use groups, $F(3, 177) = 6.45, p < .001$. The means for this index decreased monotonically with increasing alcohol use, with the low- and moderate-use students exhibiting significantly greater endorsement than the heavy-use students and CATC clients. This observation can be counted as the most general indication of a change in overall action identification levels with alcohol use. The existence of multiple independent high-level identification factors reveals that a similar single index of the degree of high-level identification is difficult to achieve in this context; here, as in a variety of other investigations (Wegner & Vallacher, 1986), high-level identification viewed through the lens of factor analysis turns out to be multidimensional. Low-level identification of alcohol consumption is unidimen-

sional, however, in that all the relevant identities appear on a single factor. This means that the overall reduction in low-level identification observed over the four groups increasing in alcohol use is the best single indicator of a general trend toward identification level change. Apparently, increasing alcohol use is associated with decreasing awareness of the details of drinking. It should be noted, finally, that this is best understood as a relative effect; low-level identification analyses conducted without total identification as a covariate did not indicate a significant increment of low-level identification with increasing alcohol use.

The multiplicity of high-level identification indexes keeps us from describing an overall trend in high-level identification with alcohol use. The individual high-level indexes do each show significant variation with alcohol use, however. Identifying the act as "hurting myself" varies reliably with alcohol use, $F(3, 177) = 17.82, p < .001$. As shown in Table 2, this identification is unpopular among low-, moderate-, and heavy-use students, and increases dramatically among the CATC clients. The frequent alcohol users were also more inclined to see the act as "relieving tension," $F(3, 177) = 5.04, p < .01$. It is interesting that the low-use students were particularly unlikely to endorse this identity of the act.

Identifying the act only as "overcoming boredom" is more frequent among the higher use groups, $F(3, 177) = 2.68, p < .05$. This meaning of the action is reliably less popular among the moderate use students than in the CATC sample. Identifying the act as "getting drunk" is likewise more frequent among the higher use groups, $F(3, 177) = 3.25, p < .05$, but the peak in this case is among the heavy-use students as compared to the low-use students. Finally, viewing the act as "rewarding myself" changes reliably over groups as well, $F(3, 177) = 4.68, p < .01$. In this case, the peak of identification is in the heavy-use students, with a drop to the lowest group level in the CATC clients. This is the only high-level identification index that does not show a tendency to increase with increasing alcohol use.

The pattern of identifications encountered in these groups can be summarized with two observations. First, across the two samples, an increasing use of alcohol is reliably related to a reduction in the use of low-level identities to characterize the act. This finding is consistent with action identification theory in showing that an overall movement away from lower levels of identification comes with increasing frequency of engagement in an act. Second, the pattern of findings appears to indicate that in the initial stages of alcohol use—as in the Trinity sample—the positive qualities of alcohol are magnified and the negative ones are deemphasized as the action becomes more frequent. Among college students, the high-level view of the act as "hurting myself" decreased, and the view of it as "rewarding myself" increased with increasing alcohol use. But in the later stages of

alcohol use—as in the CATC sample—this glow seems to dissipate and the more damaging consequences of alcohol drinking come to the fore. Subjects in alcohol treatment saw the act more as “hurting myself” and less as “rewarding myself.” So, although a general trend was observed for high-level identifications to increase with increasing experience in alcohol use, the specific high-level identities embraced by the moderate users and problem drinkers fluctuated in prominence, apparently to reflect their personal experience with the consequences of alcohol drinking.

These results are subject to the usual interpretational ambiguities associated with research on differences among intact groups. The individuals selected as high versus low in alcohol use were certainly found to differ in their identifications of the target action. Yet, these groups also differ from one another in other ways, and it is thus important to recognize that the observed variations in action identification may not have arisen purely by virtue of the variable of alcohol use that was criterial for group formation. Unfortunately, the statistical control of some of these variables (i.e., sex, age) still leaves unknown the potentially artifactual properties of other variables that were not measured. The groups may have differed in socio-economic status, for instance, or in IQ or the like.

To a degree, our design eliminates some of these ambiguities by examining whether the hypothesized relationships occur not just between samples but within them. The subdivision of the student sample into three groups differing in alcohol use reduces dramatically the potentially artifactual differences that might exist among these three groups. The subsequent finding that the action identification indexes vary sensibly over these and a fourth (albeit different) sample provides substantial reason to believe that the variable of alcohol use that differentiated all groups was indeed responsible for action identification differences. Despite the advantages offered by this design, however, it is only through the replication of these findings in yet other groups that alternative hypotheses regarding the role of group composition can be dispelled (Cohen & Cohen, 1975).

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation indicate that people who drink too much do know what they are doing. Heavy drinkers appear to understand quite clearly the meaning of their action: They think little about the details or mechanics of the act, and dwell instead on the consequences of the potentially problematic behavior in which they are engaged. Individuals whose drinking is more hesitant, in turn, appear to concern themselves with how the act is done, identifying it with regard to its details. Moderate-use individuals exhibit a mix of these tendencies, but the high-level meanings

of the action that they endorse reveal a less thorough appreciation of the negative consequences of excess.

As in most nonexperimental research, the causal priority of the variables found to be related here is left undecided. Do variations in the enactment of the target behavior (i.e., drinking) cause differences in action identification, or do these identification differences give rise to the variations in behavior enactment? This question is probably not very sensible when posed in an "either-or" manner. It is likely that both directions of causation occur in the ordinary interplay of identification and action, and a theoretical insistence on unidirectional causality may oversimplify the processes by which identification and action covary (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). Identifications may cause actions, in that they serve as templates to guide the direction and intensity of intended behaviors. At the same time, actions may cause identifications, in that the person may reflect on past actions and come to understand them in new ways (Wegner et al., 1984, 1986). Actions and identities exist, then, as interdependent elements in a system that allows them to evolve reciprocally over time. This means that any identity that a person volunteers for drinking may be as much a result of prior drinking as it is a cause of drinking yet to come.

By this reasoning, the results of this study offer some possible leads both for the diagnosis and treatment of alcoholism. With regard to diagnosis, it seems clear that action identification measurement could be a way of discovering a person's history of alcohol use. People who have used alcohol extensively in the past would be expected to identify drinking at higher levels. It could even be useful to examine the specific high-level meanings that drinking has for the individual, as these meanings might reflect the person's experience with alcohol use and perhaps the person's readiness to change. Seeing the act as "hurting myself," for example, might suggest the beginnings of a path toward self-control.

The treatment plans that could be derived from these results may, however, be somewhat more complicated. After all, those subjects in the study who saw the act as "hurting myself" and not as "rewarding myself" were, quite ironically, those who used alcohol the most. Because these people were under treatment at the time of questioning, their recognition of the negative consequences of drinking could be a function of the strong cues offered by their immediate environment as to how the action should be identified. Alternatively, it may generally be the case that people who have trouble controlling an action are especially aware of the action's consequences. Behavior problems of this kind may very well be recognized by their victims.

The question of interest, then, is whether the recognition of the self-destructive nature of the action has any impact on self-control. Common sense tells us that seeing an action as dangerous or self-destructive should

serve to instigate self-control attempts. Who would choose, apparently on purpose, to hurt themselves? One way to answer this question is to assert that the negative meaning of the action is somehow balanced, for the indulgent person, by other more positive meanings. The person who looks on drinking as “relieving tension” or “overcoming boredom,” for instance, may believe that “hurting myself” is merely a necessary evil on the way to a pleasurable experience.

Another way to view this question is in terms of the availability of self-control opportunities. Someone who identifies drinking in a high-level way will commonly do quite a bit of drinking before the identified action is complete. It may take several drinks to “relieve tension,” to “overcome boredom,” or even to “hurt myself.” In the course of doing any of these things, the particular drink, the specific swallow, or the moment of moving the glass to one’s mouth need never come to mind. The high-level emphasis on consequences entails a tendency to think about the action only after much of the action has been completed, and it is this emphasis that may promote the continuation of such maladaptive behavior.

This theoretical view provides a useful umbrella for several current perspectives on self-control. One such perspective arises from the repeated finding that asking people to monitor their problem behaviors is often an important precursor of self-control (e.g., Kanfer, 1970; Kirschenbaum & Tomarken, 1982). This observation is consistent with the idea that low-level identification is associated with infrequent action performance. Other theorists, in turn, emphasize the observation that people who fail to control their drinking behavior expect more strongly that certain effects of the behavior will arise (Nathan & Goldman, 1979). This approach, too, can be embraced within the current framework, as it follows nicely from the general assertion that higher levels of action identification occur with increasing frequency of action.

Action identification theory is not alone, of course, in suggesting a model of the hierarchical control of action. In this regard, it must be noted that the self-control hierarchy posited by Carver and Scheier (1981; see also Powers, 1973) might be used as a general guide to observations like the ones noted here. The Carver/Scheier model, however, is intended to represent the actual control of behavior, not the individual’s cognitive representation of that control. The levels in such a model thus take the form of a fixed number of markedly different psychological processes (e.g., comparison of self with principles vs. the guidance of motion), each of which depends for its execution on the processes below it. In this model, the occurrence of control at each level is largely inferred rather than observed.

The action identification hierarchy, in contrast, reflects what people say they do, and in this sense is as observable as behavior itself. The things

people say they do fall into a hierarchy of variable depth, such that some of the actual control procedures may be unrepresented in conscious action identifications, whereas others are broken down through identification into more levels than may even exist in the actual control system. But the person's phenomenology of action is critical, because it is only by consulting the person's identification that we can measure the level at which control is being sought. The Carver/Scheier model offers no such method for measurement of hierarchical level, so it is in this enterprise that an action identification perspective is markedly more useful. These results reveal that it matters greatly at what level a drinker describes what he or she is doing.

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