Alcohol Cognitive Bias Modification training for problem drinkers over the web

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Alcohol Cognitive Bias Modification training for problem drinkers over the web

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HIGHLIGHTS

• First web-based test of different varieties of cognitive training in problem drinkers
• As usual in internet research large dropout (half after inclusion, another half during training)
• Drinking went down in all conditions, including sham-training control
• Combinations of motivational intervention and cognitive training should be studied

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ABSTRACT

Following successful outcomes of cognitive bias modification (CBM) programs for alcoholism in clinical and community samples, the present study investigated whether different varieties of CBM (attention control training and approach-bias re-training) could be delivered successfully in a fully automated web-based way and whether these interventions would help self-selected problem drinkers to reduce their drinking. Participants were recruited through online advertising, which resulted in 697 interested participants, of whom 615 were screened in. Of the 314 who initiated training, 136 completed a pretest, four sessions of computerized training and a posttest. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions (attention control or one of three varieties of approach-bias re-training) or a sham-training control condition. The general pattern of findings was that participants in all conditions (including participants in the control-training condition) reduced their drinking. It is suggested that integrating CBM with online cognitive and motivational interventions could improve results.

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1. Introduction

Dual-process models emphasize the importance of both impulsive and reflective processes in many behaviors (e.g., Kahneman, 2003; Strack & Deutsch, 2004), including addiction (Bechara, 2005; Stacy & Wiers, 2010; Wiers et al., 2007). From this perspective, in addiction impulsive processes (e.g., attentional and approach biases to drug-related stimuli) gain control over behavior, even when the long-term perils of continued drug use are reflectively known. Cognitive Bias Modification (CBM) programs have been developed to target these cognitive processes in addiction, either through strengthening control processes (e.g., Houben, Wiers, & Jansen, 2011), or through changing biases in attention and action tendencies (review: Wiers, Gladwin, Hofmann, Salemink, & Ridderinkhof, 2013).

1.1. Attention Control Training

Problem drinkers have an attentional bias for alcohol-related stimuli, often assessed with varieties of the visual probe or alcohol-Stroop tasks (reviews: Cox, Fadardi, & Pothos, 2006; Field & Cox, 2008). Following the seminal study on attentional re-training in anxiety by MacLeod, Rutherford, Campbell, Ebsworthy, and Holker (2002), researchers in addiction began to investigate the effects of a single session of attentional re-training using similarly adapted visual probe tasks in heavy drinkers. Results showed that an attentional bias for alcohol could be changed, but after a single session no generalization was found to untrained
stimuli or to behavior (Field et al., 2007; Schoenmakers, Wiers, Jones, Bruce, & Jansen, 2007). Two studies examining the effects of repeated attentional re-training found more encouraging results.

Fadardi and Cox (2009) developed the Alcohol Attention Control Training Program (AACTP), aimed at increasing control over distraction by alcohol. The AACTP uses a variety of pictorial alcohol-Stroop tasks to train participants’ attention away from alcohol-stimuli, with increasing levels of difficulty. The AACTP was tested with hazardous and harmful drinkers, using a within-subjects, waiting-list design. This design was chosen in part because the AACTP uses explicit goal-setting, which makes it difficult to create a sham-control condition. The AACTP significantly reduced both participants’ attentional bias for alcohol and alcohol consumption, in the absence of changes during the initial one-month waiting period. Changes in bias and consumption were maintained at a three-month follow-up.

Schoenmakers et al. (2010) performed the first small RCT of repeated attentional re-training in alcohol-dependent patients. Patients were randomly assigned to re-training based on the visual probe task (5 sessions) or sham training, which included the same pictures and motivating feedback as the re-training. Results showed an increase in attentional bias in the control group and a significant decrease in attentional bias for alcohol stimuli in the experimental group, with generalization to untrained pictures. The CBM group was also discharged from treatment sooner and relapsed later than the control group.

1.2. Approach bias re-training

Problem drinkers show an approach-bias for alcohol-related stimuli (Field, Kiernan, Eastwood, & Child, 2008; Wiers, Rinck, Dictus, & van den Wildenberg, 2009). In the alcohol Approach-Avoidance Task (Wiers et al., 2009), participants are instructed to push or pull in response to a stimulus-feature unrelated to the contents of the picture (e.g., pull the joystick in response to pictures in landscape format, push pictures in portrait format). With a re-training variety of this task, it was demonstrated that students’ alcohol approach-bias could be successfully modified (Wiers, Rinck, Kordts, Houben, & Strack, 2010). In a subsequent RCT with alcohol-dependent patients (Wiers, Eberl, Rinck, Becker, & Lindenmeyer, 2011), patients were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions or one of two control conditions. Both experimental conditions involved four sessions of approach-bias re-training with a modified AAT, one with explicit instruction (push alcohol pictures), the other with implicit instructions (push pictures in one format, during training all alcohol pictures came in the push-format). One control condition consisted of continued assessment (alcohol pictures pushed and pulled equally often); the other consisted of pre- and posttest assessment only. Results indicated reduced approach bias in both experimental groups, both on the alcohol AAT (generalization to untrained pictures) and on an Implicit Association Test (Ostafin & Palfai, 2006). Patients in the experimental conditions relapsed 13% less often in the year to follow, compared with patients in the control groups. In a replication-study (Eberl et al., 2013), 509 alcohol-dependent patients received either approach-bias re-training or no training. Training resulted in 10% less relapse after a year, mediated by the change in alcohol-approach action-tendencies.

1.3. This study

In the present web-based study, attention control training (AACTP) and approach-bias re-training (varieties of the AAT) were directly compared. We hypothesized that all varieties of training would result in a greater reduction in drinking than sham-training. The study was different from earlier studies with clinical samples in which the goal of treatment was abstinence from alcohol; in the present study, participants’ goal was to reduce their drinking. Also, the study was entirely web-based, which has strong potential advantages, when effective (great potential impact at low costs, cf. Riper et al., 2008; Riper et al., 2011).

To summarize, we tested the efficacy in reducing problem drinking with internet-delivered training interventions, all of which have produced promising outcomes in stand-alone versions. We also included a number of psychological measures on which the AACTP had previously shown positive results (e.g., self-efficacy). The present design had three additional advantages: The large majority of participants would receive a training from which we expected a positive effect (attractive for participants). Second, the AACTP intervention could be compared with a sham-training control group. Third, the different types of alcohol-CBM for which previous research had reported positive results could be directly compared.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited via newspaper and online advertisements and a website. A total of 697 participants completed screening, 7 of whom were excluded for age (younger than 18), 42 for scoring lower than eight on the AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test; Saunders, Aasland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993), 13 for not completing the AUDIT, and 20 for dyslexia. Color-blind participants were not excluded, but could not be assigned to the AACTP experimental condition, which requires intact color vision. The remaining 615 adults gave informed consent online and were randomly assigned to one of five conditions. They were subsequently invited to participate in the online pretest session. A total of 314 participants (51%) initiated the pretest. Of these, 136 participants (44%) also completed the posttest after the last training session (see Table 1). The first follow-up was one month after the posttest (N = 109, 35%), the second two months later (N = 87, 28%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographic characteristics

Participants reported their gender, age, origin, knowledge of the Dutch language, color vision, dyslexia, and educational level.

2.2.2. Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test

The AUDIT is a brief screening instrument to identify likely hazardous alcohol use and alcohol-related problems.

2.2.3. Alcohol consumption

A Dutch adaptation (Wiers, Hoogeveen, Sergeant, & Gunning, 1997) of the self-report Timeline Follow-Back procedure (Soebell & Soebell, 1990) assessed alcohol consumption. On a calendar participants indicated the number of standard units of alcohol consumed during each day in the past two weeks.

2.2.4. Other substance-use

Lifetime use of other substances was asked with a grid and 10-point scale (0-10, ..., 91 + times used).

2.2.5. Craving VAS

Participants were asked to indicate on a Visual Analog Scale (VAS) how much they craved alcohol now.

2.2.6. Readiness to Change Questionnaire (RCQ)

The RCQ (Rollnick, Heather, Gold, & Hall, 1992) assigns respondents to the pre-contemplation, contemplation, or action stage. Scores were also combined into a single scale, after changing the signs of the pre-contemplation items (Forsberg, Ekman, Halldin, & Rönberg, 2004). Cronbach’s alpha was .76.
an alcohol-Stroop test (Cox et al., 2006). The fourth, completed a classical Stroop color-interference test (Stroop, 1935) and each stimulus and ignore the alcohol content as quickly and accurately as possible. The fourth task, participants were instructed to react to the colored background of a series of bottles, half of which were alcohol-related and half not. In the fifth task, the bottles were surrounded by a narrow, colored outline, to be named. In the sixth task, pairs of alcoholic and nonalcoholic bottles appeared simultaneously, and participants were asked to respond to the outline color of the nonalcoholic bottle.

### 2.3.2.5. ATT100-Implicit

Participants were informed that they should push pictures of alcohol away, and pull pictures of soft drinks toward them (Wiers et al., 2011).

### 2.3.2.6. ATT100-Control

Participants were asked to imagine a high-risk situation and formulate a plan to resist temptation to drink in that situation (McKee et al., 2000). The plan was to be written down and signed as a contract for completing both follow-up questionnaires. In each ATT condition, participants were trained during four sessions.

### 2.4. Procedure

The ethics committee of the psychology faculty of Maastricht University approved the study. Information about the study was given through a dedicated website, where participants could register. After registration, an online screening session was done. Participants meeting inclusion criteria were asked to given informed consent.

### 2.4.1. Overview of baseline characteristics and intervention effects per condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>AACTP (N = 17)</th>
<th>ATT100 Explicit (N = 27)</th>
<th>ATT100 Implicit (N = 35)</th>
<th>ATT90 Implicit (N = 33)</th>
<th>ATT50 Control (N = 24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender ratio (F/M)</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>10.27</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>14.19</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>6.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUDIT</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use Pre</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use Post</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use F-up-1 (N)</td>
<td>3.27 (14)</td>
<td>2.97 (25)</td>
<td>2.67 (30)</td>
<td>3.59 (21)</td>
<td>2.72 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use F-up-2 (N)</td>
<td>3.22 (14)</td>
<td>2.82 (20)</td>
<td>2.26 (22)</td>
<td>3.77 (12)</td>
<td>2.80 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craving VAS Pre</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craving VAS Post</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy Pre</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy Post</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage of Change Pre</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage of Change Post</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: AACTP = Alcohol Attention Control Training Program; ATT = Action Tendency Training; AAAQ = Approach Avoidance Alcohol Questionnaire.

### 2.4.2. ATT100-Explicit

Participants were asked to imagine a high-risk situation and formulate a plan to resist temptation to drink in that situation (McKee et al., 2000). The plan was to be written down and signed as a contract for completing both follow-up questionnaires. In each ATT condition, participants were trained during four sessions.

### 2.4.3. ATT100-Implicit

Participants were asked to react to the colored background of a series of bottles, half of which were alcohol-related and half not. In the fifth task, the bottles were surrounded by a narrow, colored outline, to be named. In the sixth task, pairs of alcoholic and nonalcoholic bottles appeared simultaneously, and participants were asked to respond to the outline color of the nonalcoholic bottle.

### 2.4.4. ATT50-Control

Participants were asked to imagine a high-risk situation and formulate a plan to resist temptation to drink in that situation (McKee et al., 2000). The plan was to be written down and signed as a contract for completing both follow-up questionnaires. In each ATT condition, participants were trained during four sessions.

### 2.5. Ethics

The ethics committee of the psychology faculty of Maastricht University approved the study. Information about the study was given through a dedicated website, where participants could register. After registration, an online screening session was done. Participants meeting inclusion criteria were asked to given informed consent. Time between sessions ranged from two to 14 days; only the post-test session was to be completed between five and 14 days after the final training session. Prior to each session, participants were sent a reminder e-mail. When a session was not completed, two additional reminders were sent. After two weeks of failure to respond, participants were excluded. At posttest the same measures were taken as during pretest (all questionnaires except the screeners). One month after posttest, participants were sent a request to take part in the follow-up sessions, during which the same questionnaires were assessed. Participants did not receive monetary compensation for the training, but did receive monetary compensation (€25) for completing both follow-up questionnaires. In each condition, participants were trained during four sessions. The nature of the training sessions varied according to the condition to which a participant had been assigned;

### 2.5.1. AACTP

Participants were trained with a Dutch translation of the AACTP (Fadardi & Cox, 2009). Readers are referred to the original publication for details of the training, briefly summarized here. The AACTP consisted of six tasks. Participants first practiced pressing the key on a computer keypad that corresponded to each of four colors until they had reached a certain speed (< 1000 ms) and accuracy (90% correct). Second, they completed a classical Stroop color-interference test (Stroop, 1935) and an alcohol-Stroop test (Cox et al., 2006). The fourth, fifth, and sixth tasks consisted of the AACTP training-tasks with increasing levels of difficulty. Participants were instructed to name the color content of each stimulus and ignore the alcohol content as quickly and accurately as possible. Before these tasks started, subjects were asked to choose eight alcoholic and eight nonalcoholic beverage bottles on the basis of preference and familiarity, which were used during training. In the fourth task, participants were instructed to react to the colored background of a series of bottles, half of which were alcohol-related and half not. In the fifth task, the bottles were surrounded by a narrow, colored outline, to be named. In the sixth task, pairs of alcoholic and nonalcoholic bottles appeared simultaneously, and participants were asked to respond to the outline color of the nonalcoholic bottle.

### 2.5.2. ATT100-Explicit

Participants were asked to imagine a high-risk situation and formulate a plan to resist temptation to drink in that situation (McKee et al., 2000). The plan was to be written down and signed as a contract for completing both follow-up questionnaires. In each ATT condition, participants were trained during four sessions. The nature of the training sessions varied according to the condition to which a participant had been assigned;

### 2.5.3. ATT90-Implicit

Instruction as ATT100-Implicit, but now 90% of the alcohol pictures appeared in the push-format, and all non-alcohol pictures appeared in the pull-format (Wiers et al., 2011).

### 2.5.4. ATT50-Control

Instructions were identical to the previous two conditions, but now half of the alcohol pictures (and non-alcohol pictures) were pushed and half pulled (as in Wiers et al., 2010; Wiers et al., 2011).
2.4. Statistical analyses

The main outcome variables were measures of alcohol use (drinking at posttest and follow-ups).¹ These were analyzed with planned comparisons on the change-scores. In the first contrast, we compared the effects of the four different active varieties of CBM (condition 1-4) with the control condition (ATT50-Control). The second comparison contrasted the effect of attentional re-training, with the pooled effect of the three varieties of approach-bias re-training. The third comparison contrasted the three forms of approach-bias re-training with the control condition. The fourth comparison contrasted AACTP with the control condition.

We first tested whether there were (unexpected) differences at pretest, using post-hoc comparisons (Games-Howell and Tukey, as recommended by A.P. Field, 2013). For drinking at posttest and follow-ups, all planned contrasts were performed twice, once using complete cases (i.e., listwise deletion), and once using multiple imputations. Fifty imputed data sets were created using predictive mean matching in the R-package MICE (Van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). Results were combined in R using Rubin’s rules (Rubin, 1987), with degrees of freedom adjusted using Barnard and Rubin’s (1999) method, as described in Van Buuren (2012).

In order to provide optimal insight into the data, means for all groups for all variables analyzed along with statistics of the overall Repeated Measures ANOVA are presented in Table 1, and in Table 2 outcomes for the main variable (reduction in drinking) with effect-sizes and confidence-intervals per group. For secondary process variables we only tested the planned comparisons in case of an indication of a Time x Condition effect.

3. Results

In addition to alcohol, the large majority of participants were current or past smokers (77%), without much lifetime use of other substances (<30% reported marijuana on 20 or more occasions, <20% medication on more than 20 occasions, and less than 10% other drugs on 10 or more occasions, in the absence of differences between the groups, $p_{\.0172} = 1.07, \rho = .35$. Dropout was not significantly associated with condition ($p > .30$). Two participants in the AACTP condition did not finish any training module, and were discarded from further analyses. There was no significant difference between conditions in drinking levels at pretest ($p$-values > .50 for all comparisons). For drinking at posttest (complete cases), none of the planned comparisons were significant, (all $p$-values > .42). As evident from Table 1, alcohol use decreased in all conditions (strong main effect of Time, $F_{1, 131} = 24.2, p < .001$). Multiple imputation results confirmed a main effect of Time (reduction in drinking), $T(79) = 5.71, p < .01$, irrespective of condition.

The same planned comparisons were tested for alcohol use at both follow-ups. At one-month follow-up, the second comparison approached significance for complete cases, $T_{105} = 1.89, p = .06$. Moreover, the second comparison was significant at three-month follow-up, complete cases, $T_{91} = 2.44, p = .017$. This suggests that approach-bias re-training had a stronger effect on reducing alcohol consumption at follow-ups than AACTP. When considering the effect-sizes of the reductions in complete cases (Table 2), two varieties of approach-bias re-training showed the strongest reductions (ATT100Explicit and ATT90Implicit, effect-sizes 4 to .5), while the effect-size of the reduction in the ATT100Implicit version was similar to that of the control condition (around .3), and the effect size of AACTP was smallest (.1).

However, these findings were not confirmed in the multiple imputation analyses for both follow-up points, where no planned contrast was significant (all $p$-values > .30).

Only in the AACTP condition, participants determined the number of training modules per session. They showed considerable variability in the number of trials on which they trained ($mean = 1,277$ trials, $sd = 1.098$). The amount of training, however, was not related to the reduction in use ($p > .50$), but was related to alcohol use at the pretest, $r_{17} = .72, p = .001$.

Of the other psychological variables assessed (see Table 1), beneficial changes were generally found across all conditions (less craving, higher self-efficacy). Only for self-efficacy a statistical trend for the Time by Condition interaction was observed. For self-efficacy, both the second and the fourth planned comparisons were significant, $T_{32} = 2.45, p = .016$. As can be seen in Table 1, AACTP showed the strongest increase in self-efficacy, stronger than the pooled active conditions of approach-bias re-training (comparison 2), and stronger than the control-condition (comparison 4).

4. Discussion

The effects of web-based CBM was tested in self-selected problem drinkers. The AACTP program aimed at increased attentional control was compared with four versions of approach-bias re-training, including a sham-control condition. The main finding was that drinking was reduced across all conditions at posttest. In complete case analyses, at one and three-months follow-up approach-bias re-training had a stronger effect than AACTP. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution for two reasons. First, the reduction in drinking in the approach-bias re-training was not significantly different from the reduction in the sham-training group. Second, the multiple imputation results indicated a reduction in drinking across all conditions. Finally, participants in the AACTP condition showed the strongest improvement in self-efficacy.

The main outcome can be described as negative: our main hypothesis of stronger reduction of alcohol use after active training compared with sham-training was falsified. However, from a clinical and public

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¹ We focus this report on the main outcome variables, which are related to alcohol use. In addition, attentional bias and approach bias were assessed at pre- and posttest, but these data were of suboptimal quality, and reporting them would require far more space. Some additional questionnaires were also included, but they are not reported due to space limitations. The general pattern of results was the same as reported here: Beneficial changes across all conditions.
Conflict of interest

RWW gave a paid talk for Lundbeck pharmaceutical company. RWW was co-applicant in two awarded grants from ERAB (the European Foundation for Alcohol Research), and KH was PI of one awarded grant for ERAB. ERAB is an independent foundation that awards alcohol-related research after an independent scientific evaluation (peer reviewed), with guarantee of completely independent scientific expression (in accordance with the Dublin principles), http://www.api.or.at/sp/alkoholpolicy20dokumente/dublinprinciples.pdf

RWW was also involved in the ERAB Underage Drinking Report (2012), which was also done in accordance with the Dublin principle.

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