

2009

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### Recommended Citation

Sacco, Paul and Bucholz, Kathleen K., "Taking the edge off: Exploring the role of stress in drinking across the life course" (2009).  
*Posters*. Paper 25 Samuel B. Guze Symposium on Alcoholism.  
<http://digitalcommons.wustl.edu/guzeposter2009/25>

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# Taking the Edge Off: Exploring the Role of Stress in Drinking Across the Life Course

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## Background and Aims

Ongoing population aging and the aging of the “Baby Boom” generation have led to increasing interest in alcohol use among older adults. These changes point to the need to greater understanding of factors that influence alcohol use among older adults, especially those that can be influenced through treatment. Stress and coping are such two factors. Currently, research on stress and coping is limited by a imprecise measurement, limited understanding of structural relationships, and limited knowledge about age group differences. Therefore study aims include:

**Aim 1:** To test a stress and coping model of current (past-year) alcohol use in a nationally representative sample of older adults.

**Aim 2:** To investigate cohort differences among current drinkers in the stress and coping model between young adult (20-40), middle age (40-59) and older adult (60+) life stages

## Methods

**Data:** This study utilized a subsample of older adult (60+) current drinkers n=4360 and all current drinkers n=17,817 from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), Wave 2, (2004-2005) n=35,653.

### Measures:

**Stressful Events:** 14 dichotomous items - Work, legal social, and health-related stresses; Past-year time frame;  $\alpha=0.86$ ; Reduced to four indicators using Exploratory Factor Analysis  
**Social Support:** Interpersonal Support Evaluation List-12; 12 items of perceived social resources; 3 subscales (Belonging, Appraisal, Tangible);  $\alpha=0.82$

**Perceived Stress:** Perceived Stress Scale-4; 4 Item measure of “cognitively mediated emotional responses”; Past-month frame;  $\alpha=0.84$

**Alcohol Consumption:** Average daily use of alcohol in ounces

**Risk Drinking:** Exceeding NIAAA Drinking Guidelines (Male=14 week/4 day; Female=7 week/3 day (Dichotomous)

**Alcohol-related problem:** Endorsement of any Alcohol Dependence Criteria

**Sociodemographic Covariates:** Age (years); Gender, Race/Ethnicity; Household Income; Marital Status; Education

**Analysis Strategy:** This study uses Structural Equation Modeling to test hypothesized relationships between stressful events, perceived stress, and alcohol-related variables.

**Stage 1:** Preliminary Analyses

**Stage 2:** Structural equation models of different age groups

**Stage 3:** Testing of measurement invariance

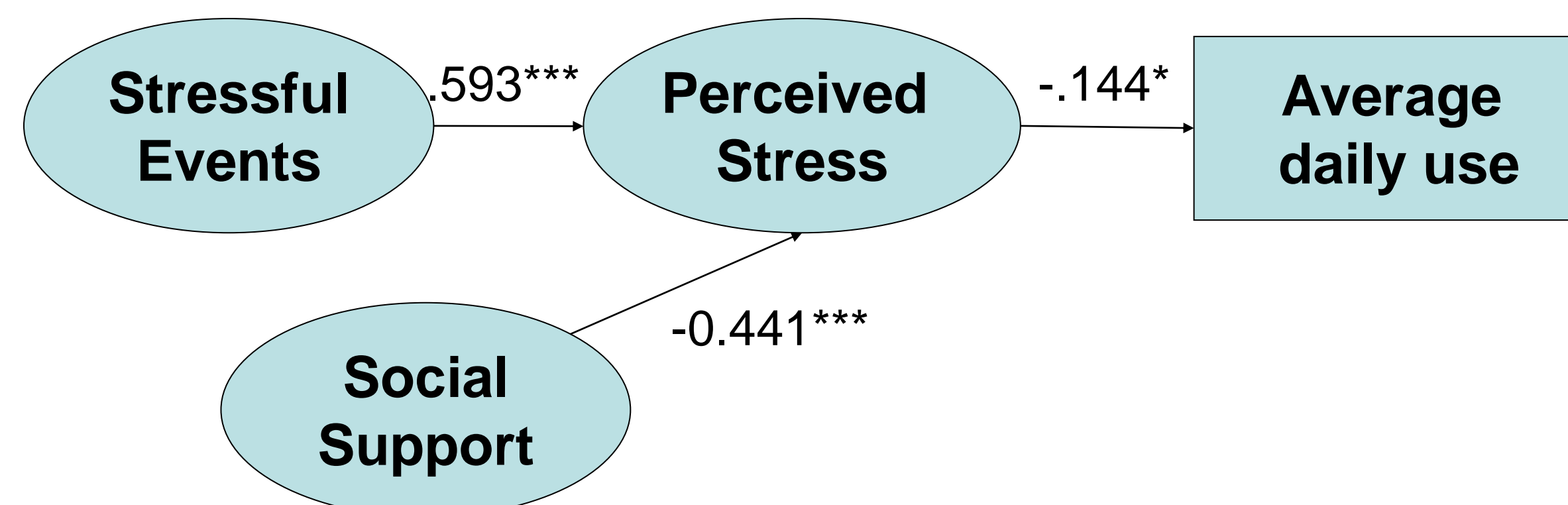
## Results

### Sample Characteristics

Measures	Young n=8609	Middle n=9208	Older n=4360
<b>Alcohol Related</b>			
Exceed NIAAA guidelines	61.38%	43.68%	24.89%
Average daily use	0.58 oz.	0.55 oz.	0.43 oz.
Any Alcohol Problem	39.33%	26.43%	12.85%
<b>Stress Related</b>			
Stressful life event scale	2.18	1.44	0.79
Perceived Stress Scale-4	3.94	3.76	3.12
Interpersonal Support	43.38	42.83	42.16

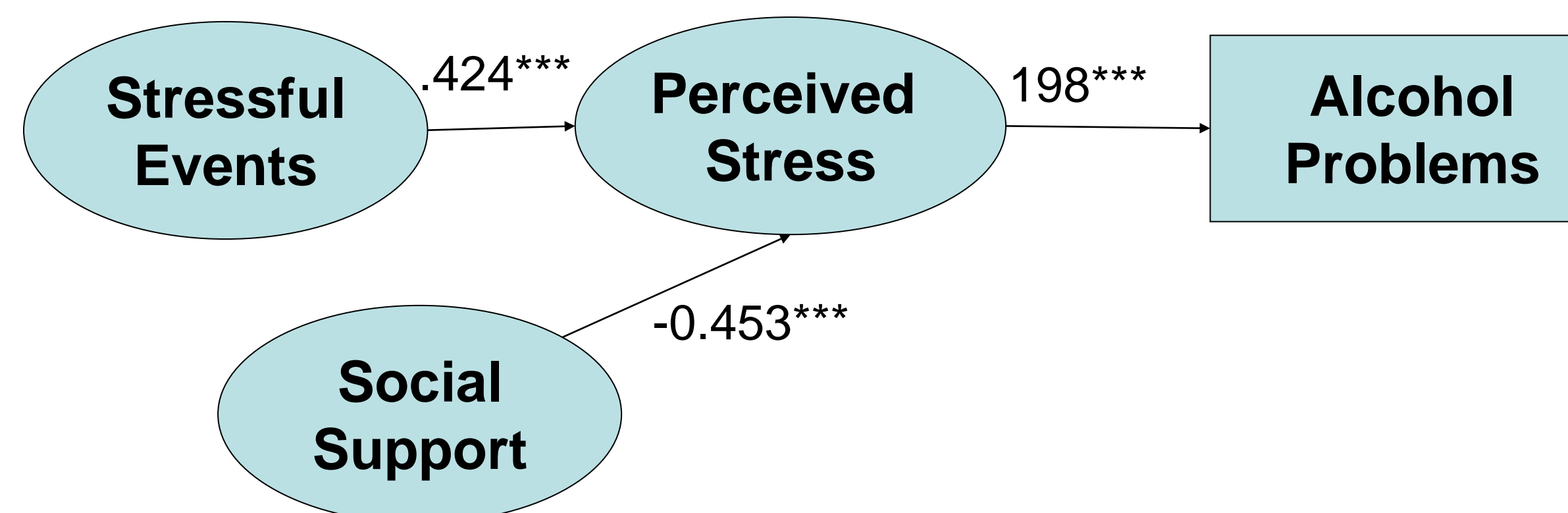
All parameters sig. –  $p < .001$

### Older Adult Structural Model



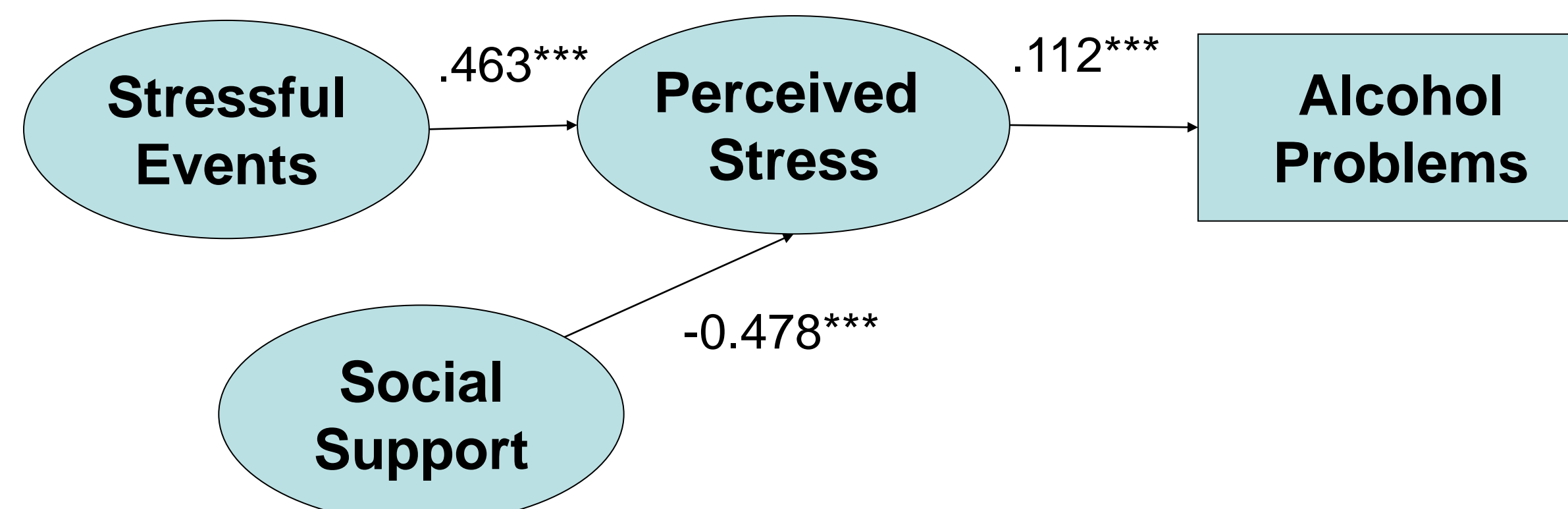
Model Statistics n=4353;  $\chi^2(67)=242.687$ ; TLI=.94; CFI=.95; RMSEA=.009; Estimator: WLSMV; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

### Middle-aged Adult Structural Model



Model Statistics: n=9196;  $\chi^2(64)=457.903$ ; TLI=.94; CFI=.95; RMSEA=.013; Estimator: WLSMV; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

### Young Adult Structural Model



Model Statistics: n=8600;  $\chi^2(68)=411.564$ ; TLI=.94; CFI=.95; RMSEA=.013; Estimator: WLSMV; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Major Findings

- Rates of alcohol related problems, at-risk drinking and average consumption were lower among older adults and higher in younger age groups
- Older adult current drinkers reported fewer stressful events in the past year and reported lower levels of perceived stress than adult drinkers, but had lower levels of social support.
- Among older adult current drinkers, middle-aged, and younger groups, social support was associated with lower levels of perceived stress.
- Among older adults, increased perceived stress was associated with a decrease in average daily consumption, although this effect was modest.
- Among both middle-aged and young adult groups, higher levels of perceived stress are associated with alcohol-related problems.

## Implications

- Consistent with previous research, older adult drinkers reported lower levels of stressful events and perceived stress, but also lower levels of social support.
- Contrary to theories focusing on the role of perceived stress among older adults, higher levels of stress are associated with lower levels of consumption. Further research focused on the stress related processes may clarify factors that contribute to the stress consumption relationship.
- Among younger groups, perceived stress was associated with greater likelihood of having dependence or abuse related problems. Further research is needed to understand the causal interplay of stress and alcohol-related problems among middle aged and younger adults.
- These findings reflect the relationship of stressful events and perceived stress in a general population sample. Further research should explore whether the relationship between stress-related constructs is different for individuals at high risk for alcohol related disorders

### Acknowledgements:

Grant support provided by the National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse through the Midwest Alcoholism Research Center (P50 AA011998) and the National Institute of Mental Health through the Center for Mental Health Services Research (P30 MH068579). Support provided to Mr. Sacco by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (T32 DA015035), the John A. Hartford Doctoral Fellows Program and the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (F31 AA018050).