

APPRENTICESHIP IN DRINKING: LEARNING TO PLAY AND BINGE DRINKING ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

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Binge drinking on the college campus and the problems associated with it carry a high cost. Problems associated with alcohol abuse on the college campus include death, injury, property damage and sexual assaults. These issues continue to plague police and college administration officials. To date, most research has focused on individual factors associated with the problem of binge drinking. In this paper the author used both quantitative and qualitative methodology to research binge drinking among college students on a university campus. The results obtained through observations and structured interviews show that students enter a developmental model of drinking beginning most often in their freshman year that continues into their senior year. Freshman students entered into an “apprenticeship of drinking” as they progressed from apprentice to upperclassman expert by learning the social and cultural norms and values of drinking on campus. For purposes of this paper binge drinking was defined as 4-5 drinks in the same setting or occasion.

Keywords: binge drinking, community of practice, enculturation, apprenticeship, situated activity

INTRODUCTION

The binge drinking rate on the college campus remains high. A report entitled, *Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use* (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, J. E., 2011) reported that the binge drinking rate for college students has remained relatively unchanged from 1993 to 2010 at 37%. The rate for the same age non-college students has continued to fall in this same time period from 32% to 28%. The costs of college binge drinking remain high. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2014) 1,825 students die from alcohol non-intentional related incidents, 599, 000 students are injured from non-intentional incidents and 97,000 students are the victims of alcohol related sexual assault or date rape. Other costs identified with binge drinking include academic failure, future addiction, unsafe sex, and property damage.

Campus police and other law enforcement agencies are generally the first contact with individuals when responding to calls involving binge drinking. Police are most often the point of contact when enforcing alcohol-related policies on the college campus (Bernat, Lenk, Nelson, Winters, & Toomey, 2014). Bernat et al. (2014) found that drinking was

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listed as a major problem for campus law enforcement and security agencies across the United States regardless of the characteristic of the institution (size, public/private, etc.). It also was found that the police generally have a number of options at their disposal when dealing with intoxicated individuals on the college campus. “The most utilized sanctions for off-campus alcohol incidents included referral for counseling services (71%), probation (69%), criminal citation (65%), parental notification (65%), and suspension/dismissal (59%)” (Bernat et al., 2014, p. 2253). The most common response amongst all agencies was referral to a college official or office. The authors also found that there was a lack of consistency in actions regarding drinking incidents on campus by law enforcement. It appears that police most often treat intoxication on campus as an individual problem. By grasping the social nature of drinking on and off the college campus officials may be able to combat this serious problem even more.

In 2002, the Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism released their final report entitled, *High-risk drinking in college: What we know and what we need to learn* (2002). The report was written to address the ongoing problem of excessive drinking in college and to recommend strategies that will reduce excessive drinking among college students. One of the primary recommendations noted in the report was a request for college administrators to employ a comprehensive deterrence effort that addresses all the reasons why binge drinking remains a persistent problem on college campuses today. In order to identify the multiple causes of binge drinking, the panel further recommended that researchers conduct studies that address the problem in a number of ways. Suggestions for researchers included a focus on developmental transitions in binge drinking and to “Discern how individual-level variables interact with the larger environment” (p. 10).

The report also called on researchers to use alternative data collection methods in the hopes that researchers could capture data that looked at all the factors involved in binge drinking. Researchers specifically were encouraged to address environmental factors that lend themselves to binge drinking, such as community pricing policies for alcohol; legal availability of alcohol; the presence of a Greek system on campus; importance of athletics on campus; school size; location; and alcohol availability off campus (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002). The report called for research that would encompass the different levels of influence and interaction prevalent in college binge drinking. As noted in the report, “Research consistently shows that no single factor determines whether a college student will misuse alcohol. Multiple developmental, individual and environmental factors influence this outcome both individually and interactively” (pg. 17). The report highlighted the complexity of binge drinking based on the interplay of individual and environmental factors prevalent on the college campus today. Most research that has addressed binge drinking has been limited to individual factors.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To date there has been a lack of documented research addressing the different transitions involved in binge drinking in the cultural-individual interactions that occur in the

college environment. The task force report on *High Risk Drinking in College* (NIAA, 2002) specifically noted that a focus on developmental transitions was needed. As noted in the report, "More studies are needed on the value of intervening at critical transitional periods with developmentally appropriate prevention strategies to reduce excessive drinking" (pg. 26). Little research to date has focused on bringing together the components involved in college binge drinking by using a true developmental transition research model.

The transitional model for problem drinking in college proposed by Schulenberg and Maggs (2002) is an example of development-based research that is needed to address binge drinking. The authors used five conceptual models that reflect the different transitions college students undergo throughout their college tenure. The models are determined by the changes in individual binge drinking brought on through the unique challenges experienced during college life. Transitions in each model address individual change but do not focus on the process of development that occurs within the larger social and cultural transitions through which an individual passes. As noted by Schulenberg and Maggs (2002), "transitions pertain more to the actual process of change than to the accomplishments that contribute to and result from changes" (p. 58). The developmental model as proposed in this research will expand on Schulenberg's and Maggs work focusing directly on the social and cultural factors that contribute to binge drinking.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study utilized a detailed questionnaire developed specifically for this study using student researchers trained in the use of the instrument. The student researchers also conducted observations on and off campus at locales frequented by students who purchase and drink alcohol. The data from the interviews and observations were cross-compared to gain a fuller understanding of binge drinking, and the data was used to confirm the validity of each data source (Seale, 1999).

A detailed questionnaire consisting of 58 questions and follow-up inquiries were prepared ahead of the study. The original questionnaire was edited after a pilot test was conducted with a small group of students. The completed questionnaire probed each interviewee's demographic data, school demographic data (on/off campus living, affiliation with campus organization, status, etc.), past drinking before college, current drinking status, and proposed or projected drinking plans. Due to the nature of the questionnaire and the time commitment involved, it was determined that it would be best to ask the questions of the interviewees rather than use a survey instrument. It also was determined that the interviewees would be more open and honest answering questions from fellow students than a college professor. Five students were trained in the use of the form. They also were trained in note taking and entering the data in Excel for examination. After a number of training sessions of interviewing themselves and other students, the student researchers were allowed to begin the interview process.

The student researchers were instructed to get a cross section of the student population. They also were ordered to enter the data immediately and remove the name of the

interviewee from the electronic record. A separate database of names using the interview consent forms was maintained to ensure that interviews were not duplicated. The interviewers were instructed to interview individuals based on their representation as a demographic. Through this process, a cross section of students in the college was obtained. The interviews, note taking and recordings were quite lengthy and time consuming. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. Entering the data took approximately one hour per interview. As a result of much work by the student researchers, 50 coded interviews entered in Excel were obtained and used in this study.

From the data entered by students into Excel, a master file was built. The raw data was then coded using terminology and trends that evolved from the data. Students entered open-ended question replies using the answers given by the interviewees. The primary researcher, who was separate from the interview process, looked for trends that emanated from the interviewees' answers using a grounded approach to find conceptual commonality (Suri, 1999). Trends were derived from the open-ended answers. The answers as recorded individually by the student researchers and examined by the author were similar in nature and reflected the social and cultural nature of drinking on campus. Trends also were noted using simple counts of close-ended questions. After the interviewees' answers were coded, a cross comparison of the different student groups was conducted. A number of trends became apparent from the data using this grounded approach. The approach used was consistent with the process of induction, deduction and verification identified by Strauss (1987). The process did not require much, if any, interpretation. The data spoke for itself.

Student researchers also conducted observations as part of the research. The observations verified the interview data and provided further insight into binge drinking at the college. The student researchers were able to make their observations without intruding or altering students drinking or social interactions. The student researchers were not allowed to drink when they were conducting research. The student researchers conducted observations (too willingly it seems) at various locales both on and off campus. Students went to small get-togethers on campus, to large parties off-campus, to nearby bars and to gatherings in fraternity houses. Observations included both planned and unplanned events that involved drinking. The researchers reveled in this research methodology and recorded hundreds of hours of observations. Their observations were insightful and captured the social nature of drinking at the college. The observations also verified the interview data and helped explore the cultural nature of drinking within the different groups on campus.

Data from the research uncovered developmental trends in binge drinking apparent in groups of students as they progress through their college career. Findings also showed that contextual factors related to the school, the surrounding environment, and formal and informal groups within the school all factored in students' decision to binge drink while attending the university.

For purposes of this research, binge drinking was defined to the respondents as consuming five or more drinks in one setting for males and four or more drinks for females (Wechsler, Dowdall, & Davenport, 1995). A drink was defined as a 12-ounce can of beer,

a 4-ounce glass of wine, 1 wine cooler, 1 shot of liquor, or 1 mixed drink containing the equivalent of one shot of liquor (Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003). The standards as set forth by Wechsler et al. (1995) are the standards for a majority of studies that have examined binge drinking on the college campus. The student researchers who conducted the interviews gauged binge drinking questions for females based on the standard of four drinks and gauged the male interviewees on five drinks.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The data show a number of interesting results that help illustrate the nature of binge drinking on a college campus. The data, as reported, shows the demographic data, individual traits and social or group trends. The data, as reported, resulted from quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Individual Demographics of Binge Drinking

The interviewees reported that beer was most often their choice for binge drinking. Almost half of the binge drinkers (21/43) reported that they preferred beer (4-5 drinks in one setting). Most of the students that reported drinking beer stated that they did so because it was readily available and cheap or free at most events. A slightly smaller number of participants (16/43) stated that they mixed beer and hard liquor. The rest stated they binge drank hard liquor only. A vast majority of students reported that they binge drank (43/50). A total of 16 reported that they binge drank at least twice per month. More than half (27/43) admitted that they binge drank once per week. The remaining student reported he binge drank once per month. The remaining seven interviewees reported that they did not binge drink. The biggest nights for binge drinking on campus were Tuesday, Friday and Saturday nights. Of note at this university was that Tuesday night was a preferred drinking night since there were no classes scheduled on Wednesday mornings. This time was originally set aside for church services.

The interview results show that drinking history prior to college had little impact on whether a student binge drank in college. Twenty-four of the 34 students that replied to the question, "Did you drink alcohol in high school" reported that they had drunk alcohol in high school. However, students who replied they had not drunk in high school (11/35) reported similar binge drinking rates in college as those that reported drinking in high school. All of the high school drinkers and non-drinkers reported that drinking in college was the norm. Most of those interviewed stated that drinking was a part of college life. Of the 43 that binge drank, 37 (86%) reported that the college environment was more conducive to binge drinking. A representative statement of this was made by a college junior who stated that the "college environment (has) more freedom, nothing else to do, friends are always drinking." The student's comment also reflects the social influence and nature of drinking at college.

Advancement through college did not affect binge drinking. In this study students reported similar levels of binge drinking across the board. Only seven of 43 students who reported binge drinking stated they would scale back their drinking as they progressed

through college. Students thought of elaborate drinking activities to celebrate or say good-bye to the end of college. As reported by a student researcher, a group of students who lived together off campus had weekly parties where they celebrated “beers across the globe” their last month of college. Each week the group would purchase imported beer from another country and have a themed party where they only drank beer from that country. The students in this group began inviting their fathers to the party, who also shared in binge drinking with their sons. As reported by the student researcher, many of the fathers had graduated from college, and the party seemed to rekindle (at least for one night) their association of college with binge drinking.

Interestingly, almost all (86%) of those interviewed that binge drank stated that they did not see themselves drinking as much once they graduated college. They saw the completion of college as the end of binge drinking. This also represents how strongly students associate college with drinking. A representative quote from a senior who was reflecting on the not-to-distant future stated, “can’t do it (binge drinking) when married with family, can’t have solid career, more important things.” Of the 28 students asked why they would or would not continue to binge drink, 23 stated they would drink less because the “environment” was different once they graduated. The environment they were talking about was friends and other social drinking colleagues at the college campus.

The only past variable that lent itself to drinking in college was parenting type. Students who reported that their parents were more permissive had a slightly higher reported rate of binge drinking than students with authoritarian or authoritative parents. Generally, past history showed little if any influence on binge drinking. Almost all the students binge drank and associated college with drinking. Their expectations, coupled with the social and cultural influences, were the strongest influences of binge drinking.

The results show that the social environment and expectations of college life had a substantial impact on binge drinking. The students that reported the highest levels of binge drinking had the strongest cultural ties. Students that were a part of an athletic team, in theater, or with the band binge drank the most. Students with the lowest reported levels of binge drinking also had strong cultural ties. Students that were members of the pharmacy and engineering professional organizations on campus reported far less binge drinking than the other students. Likewise students that were members of the religious organization on campus reported that they did not binge drink. It is likely that there were a number of students in athletics, band and theater that did not binge drink. It was also likely that a number of students that were associated with the religious organization on campus did binge drink. However, this was not the norm in this study. Our results show that social and cultural influences were the strongest determinants in binge drinking.

Social and Cultural Influences

Social and cultural influences were the strongest influences for binge drinking. The interview data shows that almost all binge drinking is connected to the socialization process on the college campus. The observations verify this finding. All but one of the 43 students who binge drank stated that they began drinking at social gatherings such as fraternity par-

ties, house parties or other group events. Most of the binge drinking students (35/43) stated that they started drinking to socialize with others on campus. The interviewees stated that they felt the need to drink in order to “fit in” with others on campus. Appropriately enough, one student stated she binge drank because drinking was a “social lubricant.”

The observations confirmed the social nature of drinking on campus. Although the student researchers made their observations at different locations on and off campus, they all noted that drinking was very social in nature. Drinking was a part of the socialization process and took different forms based on the nature of the location and the type of event sponsored at the location. Drinking itself helped structure the social interaction at the different locales. At small get-togethers at on-campus apartments and dorms smaller groups of students gathered and drank. Generally, each student would bring their own alcohol. Less alcohol was consumed in on-campus housing. In these locales, students would engage in more conversation and low-key activities. Due to the small size of the apartment, only four to five students would attend.

At off campus housing, the get-togethers tended to be larger and more boisterous. A wider variety of activities occurred at off-campus housing such as dancing, socializing, beer pong, and football (a more sophisticated game of beer pong). Students either brought their own alcohol or, at times, a keg was provided. Generally there was more alcohol consumed than on campus, and there were more participants. Guests came and went, and there was less general conversation as the discussion was more focused on the drinking activities. Drinking at bars outside of campus usually involved some type of special event. Students went to the bar to celebrate their 21st birthday or watch a local band that was playing. A popular game that was played at the bar was “quarters.” Students tended to drink hard liquor at the bar, although some stated that they stayed with beer. Students felt that they “got more bang for their buck” by drinking hard liquor. Students also drank more shots at the bar, in part to celebrate a special event. Drinking in a bar was more expensive so students generally saved drinking there for a special occasion.

Parties at the frat houses were the most boisterous of occasions. Students would congregate in separate groups in hallways and rooms. At frat houses students played games such as beer pong, Beirut, Kings, and football. Parties at frat houses were usually larger parties with more participants. Students often moved from group to group within the house. Most often students drank beer supplied by the frat house. At one frat house drinking was the main theme of the house. The different rooms within the house were intricately decorated using different alcohol motifs. One bedroom was a Wild Turkey-themed room complete with large murals of the popular bourbon. This room came complete with a bar. Another room had a Budweiser theme. Most of the rooms had an alcohol themed decorating scheme. If one tired of the spending their time in one of the alcohol-themed rooms, they could meander to the basement where there was a dance floor and a DJ booth enclosed with chicken wire (no doubt drawing upon the movie *Animal House* as an inspiration).

The social nature of binge drinking was apparent with the students’ observations conducted on and off campus. The drinking activities centered on social activities and get-

together. At times it also appeared that social activities aligned with drinking activities. Drinking on and off campus is truly a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). According to Wenger (1998), “a community of practice involves a people in joint enterprise, a shared repertoire to language and tools, and mutual engagement” (p. 73). Social get-togethers were mediated by the drinking activities at the different locales. Students played different drinking games dependent on the locale. The game of pong was played at numerous events. However, certain activities were played at only certain locations. For instance “quarters” was mainly played at bars, while the drinking game Beirut was played at frat parties. The drinking activities rules both formal and informal were understood by all that attended. Students arrived at the drinking locations with knowledge of the different norms associated at each locale. Some of the drinking games were quite complex. The game of football, for instance, is a complicated form of pong that necessitates time and knowledge of how to play (perhaps a degree of coordination as well). Students’ participation in these activities was seamless and expected.

What was most interesting was that binge drinking is an enculturation process for students that begins when they are freshman. Students are introduced to drinking on campus by older enculturated students who relay to the new students the norm that binge drinking is an integral part of college life. This is also consistent with a community of practice as defined by Wenger (1998). Students in this study reported an acceptance of binge drinking as they became practicing members of the drinking culture themselves. Drinking began early for all the students who reported binge drinking. Six students reported binge drinking before college started. Nine students reported drinking on their first day on campus, four more by the first weekend. By their freshman year all but four (39/43) admitted that they had binge drank. All the students were introduced to drinking by an older student who was familiar with drinking on campus. The manner in which it occurred varied dependent on the nature of the group the students were a part of it when they were freshman.

Football players and band members reported the highest binge drinking rates of all other students interviewed. This was consistent with research by Wechsler and Nelson (2001) who reported that athletes had higher levels of binge drinking. In this research football players had the strongest informal culture of all the groups on campus which may have been a factor in their drinking. Research by Foster, Caravelis, and Kopak (2014) found that students who have a close association with on-campus groups would be more likely to follow their cultural norms, including drinking. Football players in this research reported that they had their first drinks on campus during their recruitment overnights before school started. The players interviewed stated that it was expected that there would be drinking when they came to visit. In this case it was the older football players who introduced them to drinking.

Football players also drank during preseason football camps in the summer before school started. Again older football players accompanied them and drank with them before school started. Likewise band members reported drinking before school started. Band camps were held in the summer before school started. Incoming freshman band members expected there to be drinking in camp. Band members interviewed all stated that older band

members introduced them to drinking while in camp. Band members continued to rely on older members for providing them alcohol and escorting them to parties in their freshman year and beyond. The older band members who spoke of fondness of their freshman year admitted that they had changed roles and now were responsible for providing assistance to younger band members.

Students who were not associated with a group and entered school stated that they were also introduced to drinking by an older student. These students admitted that they began drinking within the first weeks of school in their freshman year. All the students who were not associated with a group reported “hooking up” with other students and going to parties where they drank. All of them reported they were led to parties or met up with older students who were partying. As such it is apparent that drinking on the college campus is a situated activity similar to that of an apprenticeship program (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Students began as apprentices and as they gained experience and cultural knowledge they became the expert. In organizations such as the football team and band, the experts had a strong formal role. With individuals who were not a part of a strong culture, the experts were more informal in nature. In either case the experts introduced the apprentices to drinking and the social events that encompassed drinking. Students continued to binge drink through their college career. Sophomores, juniors and seniors continued to binge drink. The only real change was reported by students who turned 21 years of age. Many stated they started drinking at the bar more often. Of the upperclassman that answered the question have you binge drank more or less this year than last year, most (20/34) stated that they drank the same or more than the previous year.

The football team had a very strong culture that initiated student athletes into the drinking culture and maintained that culture throughout their college careers. The football team not only had strong informal rules about drinking, they also had formal rules about drinking. At times during the season the team would initiate rules about when alcohol could and could not be drunk. Generally the day before a game was a “dry” day. Although there were some football players that did not drink, most of them did. Most of the time when football players drank, they drank together. A statement from one of the interviewees on the football team characterizes the strong cultural nature of drinking with the team. The interviewee was responding to a question asking if teammates chose not to drink or drink with others outside the team. His response was, “It’s okay if they choose not to drink, but it’s odd if they don’t drink with us.”

Although not associated with a particular group, students not affiliated with band, theater or football conformed to the norm of drinking in college. When asked why they binge drank, a majority, 21 of the 35 students who answered the questions, stated that they binge drank in college because of the drinking “environment.” As stated by one student, binge drinking, “is widely accepted and normal here.” Five students answered that they binge drank in high school and were continuing that trend, and two stated that they binge drank in college because they couldn’t drink at home. The non-associated students shared a culture of drinking that was more loosely formed. They intermingled with other students

at the different events as they came and went. Their knowledge of the norms was quietly understood and accepted.

In this study, social and cultural norms coupled with student's expectations were the most prevalent factors in determining student binge drinking. Although parenting was a minor factor, students decision to or not to binge drink were heavily influenced by the social nature of drinking. Drinking at the college was a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) where students drinking and activities were intertwined and, to some extent, non-discernable. Students traveled to and from different drinking events with a common knowledge of what activities were taking place and the formal and informal rules that accompanied them. Drinking at this college was similar to a situated activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where students developed from an apprentice to a master that involved bringing in new apprentices to the culture and drinking.

This research also showed the strong role that culture played with on-campus organizations. While some organizations proved to be a strong deterrent against binge drinking, such as the professional engineering organization, others proved to be a strong influence promoting binger drinking through formal and informal practices. The social nature of drinking and the effect of a positive drinking culture within an organization were powerful determinants in binge drinking. Students also had strong beliefs on the role of binge drinking in the college environment.

The college where this study took place had a number of "mocktail" (non-alcoholic, mock-cocktail drink) parties and similar events that drew upon individual students to come to gatherings. The large majority of students scoffed at the attempts, and it seemed to draw them together even more into their culture. The events were sparsely attended and were seen as a place for outliers to go. Students who had been enculturated into the belief that drinking was a part of college life saw these get-togethers not as a means to socialize informally without alcohol but as a challenge to their perception of college life. College officials did not grasp the strong social and cultural ties associated with drinking on campus.

The results of this study show the difficulty that campus police and universities encounter in combating the problem of binge drinking with policies and formal sanctions by showing how binge drinking is embedded in the culture of student life on campus. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2013) provided a number of suggestions to combat binge drinking at colleges. Among their suggestions were: Provide alcohol-free campus activities, notify parents of alcohol-related infractions, provide alcohol education; adjust academic schedules to include more Friday classes; and reduce the number of long weekends during the semester. These strategies are excellent and well-meaning. However, universities also need to focus on student expectations, the social nature of drinking, cultural influences and the re-occurring apprenticeship type program that occurs between older and younger students.

Limitations

There are limitations associated with this research. Although there were a number of demographic questions regarding individual use of alcohol, the main focus of this paper

was the social and cultural influences on binge drinking. Binge drinking is a complex problem on the college campus that shares both individual and larger social issues that must be addressed. This paper is not claiming that binge drinking is solely the result of social and cultural issues. There were individuals in this study who resisted their peer group influence and chose not to drink. Regretfully, it is also likely that there were individuals who chose to binge drink alone. This paper represents one facet of a larger problem. Binge drinking should be addressed as a complex individual and social problem.

Another limitation of this paper, some would claim, was the research methodology used. The first problem was with the limited number of participants in the sample. The use of an open-ended survey questionnaire and the subsequent recording and coding of answers was very time consuming and complex. What this research gained in depth of understanding the problem it lost in a larger sample. The research involved at least three phases that required administration of individuals and data entry. The use of student researchers also may be questioned by some. My feeling at the time was that student researchers would be able to solicit more honest answers from the interviewees and would be able to get seamless access at drinking locations I wouldn't dare venture. The sheer amount of work in data produced for this study necessitated student assistance. The recording of data (observations, interviews, database of interviewees) by student researchers took training and close supervision. In the end much was learned about binge drinking and conducting research of this type. There are future plans to conduct this research at another institution to assess the results of this study.

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