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Friends in High Places: Drinkers' Perceptions of Gender, Sobriety, and Relationships with Nondrinkers

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Friends in High Places

Drinkers' Perceptions of Gender, Sobriety, and Relationships with Nondrinkers

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Abstract

This study examines the sociological questions of how sobriety impacts friendships or relationships between college student drinkers and nondrinkers, and how drinking and sobriety influence perceptions of gender and sexuality in the eyes of college student drinkers. Researchers in the past have tended to focus on the population of students in college who drink, and significantly fewer studies have discussed issues involving students who do not consume alcohol.

Ten college student drinkers, consisting of five men and five women, were interviewed in this study. Participants tended to have very few to no nondrinking friendships, primarily associating this separation with conflicting ideas of "fun." Drinkers also tended to judge the gender or sexuality of other drinkers significantly more than of nondrinkers.

Literature Review

The Drunken Majority

- Consuming alcohol acts as a sort of lubricant against shyness and social anxieties, allowing college students to overcome their social shortcomings, build more relationships with peers, gain the courage to try and hook up with a member of the opposite sex, and effectively fit in with the others (Gilles, Turk, and Fresco 2006; Leontini et al. 2015).
- In college, drinking is generally seen as a group activity. When alcohol is consumed by a student who is alone, they can be met with negative reactions by their peers, as discussed by Niland et al. (2013).
- When college students go out, they tend to provide each other with what Vander Ven (2011:83) calls "drunk support by codrinkers." Forms of drunk support consists of a variety of situations such as holding a friend's hair back as she pukes into a toilet or helping a drunken friend get home after a rough night.

Nondrinking Deviants

- With such a great presence of alcohol consumption in the college world, especially at schools considered "party colleges," nondrinkers lead lifestyles that differ from that of the majority.
- Nondrinkers reported they rejected alcohol due to various factors including: not liking the taste of alcohol, issues of family alcoholism and having bad past experiences with drinking (Herman-Kinney and Kinney 2013).
- Other reasons involved having intense and dedicated academic, athletic, or religious identities that were not worth tarnishing by consuming alcohol (Herman-Kinney and Kinney 2013; Johnson and Cohen 2004; Vander Ven 2011).

Drinker-Nondrinker Friendships/Relationships

- Friendships or relationships between college student drinkers and nondrinkers appeared to be rather unlikely when looking at the limited amount of research conducted on the topic. Because the data on college student drinkers show how much they value group activities and getting drunk together, nondrinkers simply do not fit into that type of situation.
- However, college student nondrinkers have made attempts to conceal their true identity from student drinkers in order to try and be "one of the group."

Literature Review

- Some interviewees in Herman-Kinney and Kinney's (2013:82) study "... carried props, such as two-liter plastic pop bottles, 7-Eleven Big Gulp containers, or red Solo cups, when at a party or other drinking event to offer the illusion that they were consuming alcoholic beverages."
- College student drinkers have been known to seek out these nondrinkers, and "punish" them for being "pussies" and refusing to drink like men are supposed to (Herman-Kinney and Kinney 2013). As a result of sometimes intense harassment and occasional physical injury, nondrinkers may develop depression, mental distress, and social anxiety (Lucas et al. 2010).

Perceptions of Sex/Gender and Alcohol

- In looking at prior research conducted on the associations between drinking alcohol and masculinity and incorporating his own results of his study, Iwamoto (2011:910) and his colleagues suggest that in addition to traditionally being risk-takers, "... heavy drinking may also be perceived as a typically 'masculine' behavior."
- Student nondrinkers who were women were attacked with insults as well, and were called things like "prude," "holier than thou bitch," "wuss," and "baby" (Herman-Kinney and Kinney 2013).
- Women who succeed in consuming alcohol and rivaling their male peers can be considered "drinking like a man," which openly showcases drinking as a masculine activity (Engstrom 2012:419).

Data and Methods

I conducted semi-structured personal interviews with ten college students who engage in the consumption of alcohol. In conducting these interviews, I sought to answer my research questions, "How does sobriety influence the perceptions of gender/sexuality in the eyes of college student drinkers?" and "How does sobriety impact friendships or relationships between college student drinkers and nondrinkers." I set the age limit for my study at a minimum age of eighteen, because despite the federal law requiring a person to be at least twenty-one years old to legally purchase and consume alcohol, many underage people, especially college students, drink alcohol frequently.

To locate college student drinkers who were willing to take part in my study, I acquired the assistance of several friends, family members, and other personal contacts. I incorporated a snowball sampling method into my study, starting with my personal contacts locating any known college student drinkers who were willing to participate. Once we had finished our interview, which lasted approximately twenty-five to forty-five minutes, I then asked the participant to put me in contact with any others they knew who would be willing to also participate. These interviews were recorded using a voice recording app on my cell phone for accurate transcriptions and data analysis.

Due to the fact that I would possibly be interviewing individuals who were under the legal drinking age, I chose to use the oral method of consent rather than the written form. I did not want to take the risk of an unauthorized person obtaining any written documentation containing my participants' personal information that could link them to any illegal activities. I also assigned each individual a pseudonym. No one was allowed access to any data linking my participants to these pseudonyms or identifiers besides myself.

Findings

Drinkers Just Want to Have Fun

- Every participant described drinking as an overall social practice where they could meet, hang out with friends, and meet new people. To them, it's a way to bond, strengthen relationships with others, and form new ties.
- Drinkers appeared to be unsure what activities constituted as "fun" for nondrinkers, but offered guesses such as: reading books, playing board games or video games, or joining school clubs and organizational-type things.
- Many drinkers believed hanging out with nondrinkers would not be especially fun.

Drinker and Nondrinker Separation

- Throughout my group of participants, as drinkers, they described being closer to other college students who drank rather than those who did not. On top of having closer friendships with fellow drinkers, I found my participants to have very few to no nondrinking friends in college.
- Half of the participants believed conflicts regarding drinking and would strain personal relationships between drinkers and nondrinkers, but would not necessarily cause the relationship to end.

Internal vs. External Judgements

- Drinkers judged the gender or sexuality of other drinkers more than they did with nondrinkers, mainly according to the types of drinks and alcohol tolerance. Only one participant stated they believed nondrinkers were looked down upon by drinkers.
- When asked how other people's drink choices affected how the participant viewed or treated those people, there appeared to be a more predominant effect on views of men than women. Interviewees identified a wider variety of drinks consumed by women than men.
- The most common type of drink participants identified as being strange for a man to drink were mixed drinks labeled as "fruity" or "foofoo" drinks. Beer and whiskey were the drinks noted most as considered "man drinks," or the typical drinks men drink.

Sociological Take Away

- Drinkers saw going out and drinking alcohol as a social activity where they could hang out with their friends, form new relationships, and have fun. The low numbers of friendships between college drinkers and nondrinkers, and some participants' explanations of why seem to support the findings of Niland (2013) and Leontini et al. (2015) that describe drinking as necessary or a requirement for socializing and forming friendships in the college drinking population.
- Participants tended to judge other drinkers more harshly regarding gender and sexuality than they did with nondrinkers, particularly in reference to types of drinks consumed and alcohol tolerance.
- Little evidence in this study supported the idea that drinkers heavily criticize or judge nondrinkers for not "manning up" or having "fun."

Future Research Plans

In this study, I limited my participants to only college student drinkers. In future studies, I hope to interview nondrinkers in college in order to get the "other half" of the story. By doing this, I could compare the experiences of drinkers and nondrinkers and see how both sides are alike and different.