Mar 29th, 11:30 AM - 1:30 PM

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

Seth Behrends
University of Northern Iowa, behresab@uni.edu

Copyright ©2016 Seth Behrends

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/rcapitol

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Social Psychology and Interaction Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation
Behrends, Seth, "Friends in High Places: Drinkers’ Perceptions of Gender, Sobriety, and Relationships with Nondrinkers" (2016). Research in the Capitol. 3.
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/rcapitol/2016/all/3

This Open Access Poster Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research in the Capitol by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
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 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.

**Perceptions of Sex/Gender and Alcohol**

- When asked how other people’s drink choices affected how the participant viewed them, interviewees identified a wider variety of drinks consumed by nondrinkers, mainly according to the types of drinks and alcohol tolerance. Only one participant stated they believed nondrinkers were looked down upon by drinkers.

- Many drinkers believed hanging out with nondrinkers would not be especially fun.

- Drinkers appeared to be unsure what activities constituted as “fun” for nondrinkers, but offered examples 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.

**Friends in High Places**

- 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 bitches,” “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).

**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. 2015).

**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 were 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 examples 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.

**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 Leonetti 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.