

# **Binge Drinking: Motives and Expectations in the College Population**

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## **Introduction**

The complex and pervasive problems of alcohol abuse in the college population was first reported by Straus and Bacon (1953) well over 50 years ago. Since that time, a plethora of articles on the topic have appeared in the scientific literature (Walters and Bennett, 2000). Heavy episodic or binge drinking among college students has been identified as the number one threat to campus life (Syre et al., 1997). Media reports of alcohol related sexual assaults, personal injury and even death have alerted the public and their political representatives to the problem. Despite the best efforts of college administrators and health professionals to develop creative and comprehensive alcohol prevention programs, the problem persists. In fact, college students today are drinking more frequently and in greater amounts than ever before (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, 2007). Alcohol prevention programs are simply not effective in reducing alcohol consumption on college campuses (Walters and Bennett, 2000).

## **Binge Drinking**

Data from several surveys indicated that the vast majority of college students consume alcohol (Presley, Meilman, and Lyerla, 1994). College students drink more frequently and in greater numbers than their peers who do not attend college (Johnston et al., 1997). Defined as five consecutive drinks for men and four consecutive drinks for women within a two-week period, binge drinking occurs among 44% of college students (Weschler et al., 2002). These data have remained constant over time (Weschler et al., 1994). On average, college students consume 9.6 drinks per week (Engs, Diebold, and Hanson, 1996). Survey results show that 41% of males and 34 % of females consume alcohol at or above the binge drink threshold (White, Kraus, and Swatzwelder, 2006).

A number of environmental and social factors have been identified as important influences on college students' drinking behavior: the presence of a Greek system (Lo and Globetti, 1993); student involvement in athletics (Leichliter et al., 1998); students' residence (on or off campus) (O'Hare, 1990); the size of the institution (Presley et al., 1996); alcohol outlet density (Newman et al., 1991) and alcohol prices (Chaloupka, 1993).

The excessive use of alcohol has been linked to a wide variety of negative consequences: alcohol-related driving injuries and fatalities (Baer, Kivlahan, and Marlatt, 1995); unplanned sexual activity (Abby, 1991, 2002); physical injury, criminal mischief, property damage and trouble with law enforcement officers (Weschler et al., 1995); over 100 student deaths, 500,000 serious injuries, and 400,000 cases of unprotected sex (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002). Because of its disinhibiting effects, alcohol abuse is also linked to aggressive behavior (Ito, Miller, and Pollock, 1996), and is associated with high incidence of date rape (Modestin et al., 1996).

There is almost universal agreement among college administration and health professionals that alcohol abuse is the most widespread recreational drug used by college students, and that binge drinking is a major health problem (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 1995). Faced with this problem, and with no immediate solution in sight, in the summer of 2008, 200 college presidents called on lawmakers to consider lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18 years. Their effort was referred to as

the Amethyst Initiative—a proposal based on the assumption that the current policies and prohibitions against drinking may actually encourage students to binge drink.

A search of the literature yields little evidence that lowering the drinking age will solve the binge drinking problem. There is considerable evidence that such action may exacerbate it. For example, high school students 18 years old and younger seem to be keeping pace with college peers in terms of alcohol consumption. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2004), 62% of tenth graders and 72% of twelfth graders have used alcohol and 41% of tenth graders and 55% of twelfth graders have been drunk. In addition, 65% of college students who drink began drinking in high school (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2007) and according to Shinew and Parry (2005), only 13% of college students began drinking after entering college. Finally, lowering the drinking age appears antithetical to recent research on neurobiological development. The data suggested that cognitive functions, such as impulse control and decision making, are still developing into early adulthood (Fomito et al., 2004). During this critical period of development key regions of the young adult's brain is at risk due to the neurotoxic effects of excessive alcohol consumption. Clearly, a better alternative to lowering the drinking age is to increase research efforts designed to yield a better understanding of why so many students (even some of the brightest) engage in such irrational, risky, and self-destructive behavior.

#### Factors Related to Binge Drinking

In a search for answers to these questions, researchers have conducted studies on the motive and expectations underlying excessive drinking in the college population (Read et al., 2003). Some scholars have argued that college students simply don't see it as a problem (Broadbent, 1994), or possibly because students tend to identify hangovers as the most serious consequence of excessive drinking (Crundell, 1995). Still others suggest that students drink in order to attain valued outcomes or as a means of coping with stress (Cooper, 1994). Abbey et al. (1993) emphasize the satisfaction of social needs, while Berkowitz (1990) insists that peer influence is the most important factor leading to excessive drinking. According to Bosari and Carey (2001) there are three basic determinants of peer influence on student drinking: "overt offers of alcohol, modeling and social norms" (p. 391).

Research on peer influence has shown that individuals who have friends who drink are more likely to begin drinking (Reifman et al., 1998), and that individuals who binge drink are likely to have friends who drink (Manski, 1995; Moffitt, 2001). As Duncan et al. (2005) point out: "as long as individuals are free to choose their friends, it is possible that someone's substance abuse behavior or personal characteristics associated with substance abuse are affecting his or her choice of peer group" (p. 376). Since most research on peer influence is correlational in nature, the question is: who is influencing whom?

#### The College Culture

The heaviest drinkers in the United States are young adults (Naimi et al., 2003). College students drink more frequently and in greater amounts than their peers who do not attend college (Johnston et al., 1997, Bennett, Miller, and Woodall, 1999). This is consistent with the notion that alcohol consumption is part of the culture of college life (Crundall, 1995)—a so-called rite of passage into adulthood (Schulenberg et al., 1996). Cary (1995) indicates that the social context of the college environment has influence on the drinking patterns of students. According to Engs, Diebold, and Hanson (1996), "Drinking is perceived as part of the college experience by most students" (p. 28).

Without question the college culture plays a role in student drinking, but some researchers may have exaggerated its effects. As Weitzman and Nelson (2004) report, "While the heaviest drinkers are at greater risk for harm, they are relatively few and generate proportionally small amounts of all drinking harms" (p. 247). This statement is supported by Weschler et al. (1999), who found that the top 17% of students in a large sample who drink heavily and frequently, consume 68% of the alcohol drunk by college students.

Given these data and the degree of influence attributed to the college environment on students' drinking patterns, one has to question why so many students who function in the same environment and are subject to the same pressures are able to curb their drinking. From an existential perspective, no

matter how many environmental factors impinge upon the students, ultimately it is the individual who makes the choice to drink or to decline.

### Motives and Expectations

Both research and theory suggest that drinking motives can be subsumed under two general categories: drinking to socialize and drinking to relieve stress (Brennan et al., 1986). A distinction between drinking motives and alcohol expectancies is often made (Kuntsche et al., 2005, Oei and Morawska 2004). According to Baer (2002), "Drinking motives refer to the need or psychological function that alcohol consumption fulfills while expectations "relate to the use and risk associated with drinking" (p. 45). Research by Brown (1985) showed that expectancies were better predictors of college students' drinking than background or demographic variables. A study by Leigh and Stacey (1993) showed that positive expectancy on the part of students was a stronger predictor of rates of drinking than was negative expectancy. Students who drink for social reasons usually have positive expectations. They tend to associate alcohol consumption with fun, laughter, relaxation, feelings of euphoria, and sex.

### Research Methods

In past research various instruments or questionnaires have been employed to determine the drinker's motives or expectations (Steward and Power, 2002). In other research strategies, students are simply asked to provide reasons for why they drink (Lo and Globetti, 2000) and subsequently assigned to various categories. Participants, 87% of which are enrolled in psychology classes, (Schultz and Schultz, 2006) are students who volunteer and are given extra credit for their participation. Motives and expectations are operationally defined by student responses. Because of the Likert type format used in most surveys (a statement or question followed by alternatives ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) this method may suggest responses not otherwise considered by the student. Closed questions found in most questionnaires generally yield less information than open-ended questions.

A clear understanding of what motivates students to binge on alcohol requires insight into the biological, cognitive, emotional and social factors that influence the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of such behavior (Green, Beatty, and Arkin, 1984). Surveys are quite limited in yielding measures of all these important aspects of motivation.

In a recent review of the literature on drinking motives of young people Kuntsche et al. (2005) state that "In most cases, decisions about drinking are even unconscious or automatized" (p. 842). Support for this idea can be found in the social-psychological literature. As Baron, Byrne, and Branscombe (2006) have indicated:

In fact, a growing theme of recent research in social psychology is this: In many cases we really don't know why we think or behave as we do in social contexts. On the contrary, our thoughts and actions are shaped by factors and processes of which we are only dimly aware at best, and often take place in an automatic manner without any conscious thought or intention on our part. (p. 17)

Such an observation calls into question the validity of responses to self-report inventories. Are students truly aware of their drinking motives, and if so, will they provide truthful answers? Do their responses to survey questions reflect motives for drinking or justifications for drinking? As Sobel and Sobel (1993) have suggested, alcohol intoxication is "socially acceptable as an excuse for engaging in certain otherwise inappropriate behaviors" (see Lilienfeld, *Seeing Both Sides*, 1995, p. 331).

If students are motivated to drink in order to attain certain outcomes as Cooper (1994) has suggested, what outcomes do they expect? Is drinking an end in itself or the means to an end, i.e., instrumental in obtaining other desired outcomes? Since college age students are in their sexual prime and their sex drive is at its height, it seems reasonable to assume that many students may drink as a means of engaging in various types of sexual activity, although they may be reluctant to admit such on a questionnaire. Most students will be candid about their drinking patterns and motives while others may distort, suppress or even lie about their behaviors.

### Alcohol and Sex

Increased alcohol use is strongly and consistently associated with sexual activity: having multiple sex partners (Graves, 1995); sexual assault (Abbey, 2002); unplanned sexual activity, unwanted sexual

advances, and date rape (Weschler, 1998). Surveys of college students show that 74% to 78% of males and 69% to 85% of females are sexually experienced (Weinberg, Lottes, and Gordon, 1997) and that one of the most popular places to meet is at a bar (Laumann et al., 1994). Following a review of studies focused on the relationship between drinking and risky sexual behavior in samples from the college population Cooper (2002) stated that "Drinking was strongly related to the decision to have sex and to indiscriminate forms of risky sex (e. g., having multiple or casual sex partners), but was inconsistently related to protective behaviors (e. g., condom use)" (p. 101). She adds that on average, college students "have more than 8 new sex partners in their four years of college (p. 115).

For many students alcohol consumption is sexually stimulating because it is expected to increase sexual responsiveness, not because of its chemical properties. In addition, alcohol consumption allows the individual to attribute his or her social behavior to alcohol rather than one's own conscious (or unconscious) decision making (Crowe and George, 1989). In a survey of over 1000 undergraduate students Grossman (1991) reported that more than half of the students who met the threshold for binge drinking admitted to engaging in sexual activity with someone they would not have otherwise chosen had they not been drinking.

With respect to survey data, it should be noted that students' self-reports of sexual activity may be contaminated by virtue of the fact that over 100,000 students between the ages of 18 to 24 have reported having been too drunk to know if they had consented to sex or not (Hingston et al., 2002).

Even in a time of changing values, postponing sexual activities is still the current moral and social ideal but few students live up to that standard. Clearly, the strong link between binge drinking and sexual activity does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs as a result of the convergence of a number of complex and interrelated personal, social and cultural factors: students' new-found independence from parental influence; peer pressure that encourages conformity to perceived drinking and sexual norms; large quantities of unstructured time; the "hook-up culture" that imposes few restrictions on irresponsible and reckless conduct; a constant and unprecedented media bombardment of messages linking drinking, glamour and sex; celebrity models exhibiting outrageous behavior; little or no negative consequences for inappropriate behavior; inadequate enforcement of drinking laws; college administrators concerned with the press of other matters; and the lack of even a moderately successful alcohol prevention program.

#### Theoretical Models of Drinking Motives

A number of theoretical models have been advanced to explain the motives and expectations of binge drinkers (Durkin, Wolfe, and Clark, 1999; Norman, Bennett, and Lewis, 1998; Oei and Baldwin, 1994; Abrams and Niauva, 1987; Bandura, 1986). But as Oei and Morawska (2004) have indicated, "What characterizes most of the research and intervention efforts into binge drinking specifically, but also alcohol use in general is a lack of a coherent theoretical approach" (p. 165).

Most of the theoretical models found in the literature focus on the difference between individuals who binge drink and those who do not; the attitudes and cognitions of binge drinkers; the extent to which individuals believe they have control over their drinking; outcome expectations and self-efficacy (the belief in one's capacity to perform a specific task or reach a specific goal). None of these models attaches any special significance to sex as a motive or goal. If anything, sexual motives and expectations are conspicuous by their absence. For all practical purposes, the biological component of drinking motives has received relatively little attention.

To a significant degree, and at the risk of over simplifying a complex problem, binge drinking among college students may be explained by employing basic learning principles. According to B.F. Skinner (1993) behavior is shaped by its consequences and behavior followed by positive outcomes is strengthened and more likely to be repeated. While the data on the negative sexual activities associated with binge drinking have been well documented, there is little data available on the positive consequences (e. g., the incidence of mutually satisfying, consensual, non-regrettable sex) linked to and reinforced by, prior drinking episodes. Binge drinking may also be reinforced by the absence of negative consequences. As Wesley Perkins (2003) has suggested "an intoxicated student who behaves obnoxiously in public may feel no embarrassment or condemnation at all if the students' peers simply think of the students' actions as typical of most students" (p. 99). Moreover, satisfying sexual intimacy may not occur following every

episode of binge drinking, but intermittently. Behavior reinforced on such a schedule is highly resistant to extinction.

#### Concluding Comments

Research and theory have provided the educational community with vital information about the binge drinking phenomenon. Information about many of the personal, social, cultural and environmental factors related to heavy episodic drinking is readily available in the literature. Research tells us what binge drinking is, which college students are most likely to engage in such behavior, and when and where it is most likely to take place. Innovative research is now needed to explain why students who are able to master physics, chemistry and mathematics are unable or unwilling to avoid the obvious dangers inherent in binge drinking. Moreover, creative research is needed to determine the extent to which consensual sexual intimacy plays a role in the motives and expectations of students who abuse alcohol.

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