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Drinking As A Background Activity: The Role of Alcohol Use
Among African American College Women

Stacey A. Peterson
College of Notre Dame of Maryland
speterson@ndm.edu

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Introduction

The Role of Drinking and Social Bonding in College

Drinking is considered to play a significant role in how college students develop relationships and strengthen social bonds (Hanson, 1984; Rabow & Duncan-Schill, 1995; Lederman, 1998). The social interactions that take place during drinking encounters contribute to the ways students learn social norms and acceptable social behaviors while in college. Therefore, the behaviors of peers play a significant role in the choices students make when it comes to drinking.

Drinking among young people in general is a major societal concern, but the occurrence of college student alcohol use has received a significant amount of attention over the past several years. A study covering the time period from 1980 to 1984 found that more than 80 percent of college students drink alcohol, a number higher than the national average at the time of 63 percent (Cherry, 1987). Engs and Hanson (1985) reported that 15 to 25 percent of college students were heavy drinkers. That number had risen to 22 percent in 1994 based on research conducted by Gonzalez and Broughton (1994). Wood, Read, Palfai and Stevenson (2001) state in their Year 2000 examination of college student drinking that approximately 40 percent of college students were heavy drinkers.

In addition to drinking trends, increasing attention has been paid to the levels of alcohol consumption by students and what has been construed as problematic and excessive drinking, also referred to as binge drinking (Crundall, 1995; Hanson & Engs, 1992; Wechsler & McFadden, 1979; Saltz & Elandt, 1986; Wechsler & Issac, 1992). Wechsler et al. (1994) defined

binge drinking as having five or more drinks in a row for men and having four or more drinks in a row for women in one sitting. In this study, they found that students who were heavy drinkers were likely to binge drink on 10 or more occasions in the past month, were more likely to have been drunk three or more times in the past month, and reported drinking to get drunk.

So-called binge drinking has embodied a dominant line of research because it has been equated with dangerous and disruptive behavior (Jeffrey & Negro, 1996; Wechsler, Dowdell, Davenport, & Rimm, 1995). Even though binge drinking can lead to a variety of health concerns like motor vehicle accidents, accidental deaths, injuries (Milgram, 1993) high risk sexual activities (Butcher et al., 1991; Cohen & Lederman, 1998), and unintended pregnancies, several studies found that college students seem to associate drinking with sociability and positive outcomes, (Nezlek, Pelhington, & Bilbro, 1994). Another issue involving motives for drinking is if students see their peers taking part in drinking behavior. According to Clapp and McDonnell (2000), students reported drinking at higher levels because they have high perceptions of how much their peers drink and that the social and physical environment at college encourages alcohol use, therefore, contributing to their drinking-related activities.

Who Drinks at College

Several studies have outlined the profile of the typical college student drinker. Rapaport et al. (1999) report that the largest amount of drinking occurs for students in their freshman and sophomore years, and by the time they reach junior and senior years, they tend to drink significantly less. Engs and Hanson (1985) found that whites, particularly males, were significantly more likely than blacks to be heavy drinkers and that these men primarily drink beer. They also found that 41.5 percent of black students abstained from drinking while only 14.6 percent of whites abstained. In addition, 22.3 percent of white students were classified as

heavy drinkers compared to 4.4 percent of black students. They also reported that there was a significant increase in drinking, particularly among white women, and these heavy drinkers reported problems such as hangovers, drinking and driving, and nausea and vomiting as problems related to drinking.

A limited amount of research has examined racial differences in drinking practices. According to Meilman, Presley and Cashin (1995), African American students report consuming smaller quantities of alcohol than white students and report fewer experiences of binge drinking. Meilman, Presley and Lyerla (1994) found that black students are less likely to be at risk for alcohol problems than whites, have an average weekly alcohol consumption one-third less than that of whites, and binge drink less than half as much as whites. Saltz and Elandt (1986) found that whites are least likely to abstain from alcohol while non-whites are likely to be infrequent, light, or moderate drinkers. Research has also shown that when white and black males and females have been evaluated for their drinking behaviors, black women are the least likely to be excessive drinkers and have more of a tendency to report abstaining from alcohol (Humphrey, Stephens, & Allen, 1983; Connors, Maisto, & Watson, 1989).

Drinking as Social Practice Among African Americans

With all of the attention paid to drinking and college students, little has addressed the role race and ethnicity play in how and why college students drink. While some investigation has examined drinking within the overall African American community (Rebach, 1992; Lex, 1987; Tucker, 1985), very little has examined the role alcohol plays in the social lives of African American college students. This study examines the social interactions of African American college women through their alcohol-related experiences. It examines how relationships are

formed and solidified among a group of easily identifiable low and moderate drinkers, and how alcohol does not play such a centralized role in their social encounters.

Drinking Practices of African American College Students

A limited avenue of investigation has actually examined drinking from the perspective of African American college students.

The overall drinking practices of black and white male undergraduates were examined by Reese and Friend (1994). They found that white students associated alcohol with physical and social pleasure, social assertiveness, and tension reduction more than black students did. They were also more likely to associate these expectancies with higher levels of drinking beer than black students were.

When examining psychosocial variables as they relate to the drinking habits of black college students, Ford and Carr (1990) found that lack of social support is the best predictor of drinking hard liquor for African American male college students. Social support was defined as the types of emotional aid or assistance supplied by family members, friends and colleagues. Also, according to their findings, black students who drink alcohol can be characterized as light to moderate drinkers with males drinking more than females. Another finding is that while black males are more likely to drink more than black females, black females are more likely to seek social support for their drinking behaviors. Ford and Carr's (1990) findings support those by Thurston (1982) who found that black students can be characterized as light drinkers and that a modest amount of students were moderate or heavy drinkers.

Racial differences in binge drinking habits were evaluated by Meilman, Presley and Lyerla (1994). They examined data collected by the Core Institute of Southern Illinois

University of 40,192 students and conducted a number of statistical analyses. They did not report on the age, gender, or racial breakdown of the students or their year in college. According to their findings, black students reported lower percentages of adverse consequences associated with drinking. Some of the more prevalent consequences were experiencing hangovers, poor academic performance in class, participating in arguments and fights, experiencing nausea and vomiting, memory loss, sexual misconduct, becoming physically injured, and later regretting their actions associated with drinking.

The authors suggest that black students experience many of these negative consequences at half the rate of whites and also suggest that black collegians are less likely to be at risk for alcohol and other drug problems than whites. Another of their findings was that black students report their average weekly alcohol consumption to be one-third that of white students. Black students report binge drinking at rates less than half that of white students.

Meilman, Presley and Cashin (1995) compared drinking habits of blacks at historically black universities and those who attend predominantly white universities. They also compared the drinking habits of black college students and white college students at both types of universities. They found that black students reported consuming smaller quantities of alcohol than white students regardless if they attended a black or white institution. Also, white students reported consuming less alcohol and binge drinking less often if they attended a black school as opposed to a white school. Binge drinking was defined as the consumption of five or more drinks in one setting but did not take gender into account. Another finding was that black students reported consuming statistically similar amounts of alcohol regardless if they attended a predominantly white college or a predominantly black one, and this amount is significantly less than the consumption rates of white students. Also, at predominantly white colleges, a

significantly larger percentage of white students report binge drinking than black students. Although their research did not address any of the reasons behind why these students drink, it does suggest that race likely plays a role in alcohol consumption and alcohol related behaviors. This dissertation will seek to address these issues.

Grenier, Borskey and Folse (1998) conducted a survey of student drug and alcohol behavior at an all-black university in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to examine the drinking behaviors at a predominantly black university. The researchers found that 75.5 percent of the respondents report drinking once or twice a month or less. Twenty-three percent of the students said they abstain from drinking alcohol, 21 percent report drinking once or twice a week and only 2.7 percent report drinking every day. Using five or more drinks per drinking occasion as a benchmark, 13 percent of respondents report binge drinking and typically, students drink 1 to 2 drinks in a given sitting. The researchers also found that the students prefer wine coolers and beer to other types of liquor. In summarizing their findings, the authors stated that even though a third of the students said they believe getting drunk is part of the typical college experience and 34 percent say that parties are more fun if a person has had a few drinks, 85 percent of them said they would attend a party that was non-alcoholic. They conclude that these students are moderate drinkers compared to the image of drinking and partying that permeates most colleges and universities.

The aforementioned literature illustrates that there are not only racial differences in drinking among college students, but also significant differences between the drinking practices of African American and Caucasian women college students. This study examined the role drinking plays in the social lives of African American college women and why they have been reported to drink significantly less than other populations. Since they reportedly drink the least,

it is meaningful to see what personal characteristics, perceptions, and ideas explain their limited use of alcohol.

This study has addressed the social activities these women participate in, how they develop their relationships, and how they form social bonds while in college. This study addressed the role that alcohol plays in their social lives and why alcohol does not contribute to how they form social bonds. African American students report lesser degrees of excessive drinking and higher levels of abstaining from alcohol than Caucasian students do. While previous research has illustrated that Caucasian students bond over their experiences with alcohol, results from this study show that African American women bond in their informal social encounters with alcohol playing a lesser role. This study examined the issues that contributed to how African American women formed their social bonds and the reasons why. Since a line of inquiry on this subject matter has been conducted at predominantly white universities with white students, this study has examined the concept of social bonding through the social interactions of African American college women who reside on campus at a predominantly white, but multi-racial university.

To address the general question of how African American female college students build social bonds and the role alcohol plays in their social interactions, African American women who attend a predominantly white university were interviewed. This study addressed the reasons why these women drink, why they do not drink, how alcohol plays a role, if at all, in their social interactions, and how these women socially bond.

Methodology

Using Qualitative Research

Spradley (1979) discussed the significance of language in understanding how people come to make meaning and transmit culture between members and generations. He stated that it is important to make use of what people say as they seek to describe their culture. Hence, culture is revealed through speech both in casual comments as well as lengthy interviews. Lindlof (1995) also stated that interviewing people helps to understand their perspectives on a scene, to retrieve experiences from the past, to gain insight or information, to understand a sensitive or intimate relationship, or to analyze certain kinds of discourse. Spradley (1979) added that the existence of several realities can be addressed because cultural members are describing them in their own words. These individuals become a valued source of information about the common experiences that make up their culture. Qualitative research allows a researcher to give voice to the respondents by hearing what they say, seeing what they do and representing their understandings of their social world as accurately as possible (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Thus, this study used qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing the data.

Qualitative research is an effective way for researchers to understand why people conduct themselves in certain ways and how they construct and share meaning. Qualitative research allows for rich descriptions and explanations based on the ways that people make sense of their social contexts. For this particular study, it is essential to hear from cultural members just how they build relationships, how they interact with friends and form social bonds, and if alcohol plays any significant role in their social lives.

Qualitative research is geared towards human understanding. Lindlof (1995) points out that qualitative inquiry represents a theoretical interest in human interpretational processes, a concern with studying socially situated human action, the use of human investigators as the primary research instruments, and narrative forms for coding data and ultimately writing the

evaluation of the data. Feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1991), which allows for women's experiences to be at the center of analysis, provides a foundation for how minority women can express their experiences in their social interactions.

Using Focus Group Interviews for Data Collection

The data for this study was collected via focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are a means for conducting qualitative research in in-depth, group interviews where participants are chosen because they are a purposive, although not representative, sampling of a specific population, who can articulate ideas based on their shared experiences of their social world (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956). Focus group interviews are suitable for this study because they create a safe atmosphere for participants where they can be candid about their viewpoints, they allow the researcher to gather a significant amount of data in a relatively short period of time, and they allow for richer and deeper data than can usually be gathered by interviewing people in a one-on-one manner. Other strengths of focus group interviews are that they allow participants to get comfortable with other people and gain social support from one another, and they are structured to the point where the interviewer is able to cover the topics of importance to her, but flexible enough to provide for spontaneity in the group interactions. Therefore, students will be able to talk about issues that are relevant to them outside of the interview protocol. In focus group interviews, the group as opposed to the individual is interviewed and the interactions of group participants and the interviewer lead to a synergistic output; "a voice" of those who participated (Lederman, 1996).

Another reason why focus group interviews are appropriate means for data collection for this study is because as Lindlof (1995) explained, they capture the "dynamic processes of natural group interaction or collective interpretation" (p. 174). He stated that focus group interviews in a

way mimic the dynamics of everyday social discourse as members of the group debate, resolve issues, or support each other during the interaction. He added, “focus groups create settings in which diverse perceptions, judgments, and experiences concerning particular topics can surface” (p. 174).

McLauren (1995) suggests that focus group interviews are effective for studying members of minority populations because they allow for the unique communication styles and dynamics of African Americans to emerge in their talk. Respondents will be allowed to speak in their own words and style, which play a significant role in forming and maintaining African American group identity. Smitherman (1977, 1994) adds that African Americans are steeped in an oral and storytelling tradition. Focus group interviews will provide a context with which to express these stories. McLauren (1995) also maintains that having a researcher who is of the same ethnic background and in this case gender, as the participants helps in building rapport and allows for a greater level of acceptance. He states that students tend to be more willing to open up and share with interviewers when they feel they can relate to the social identity of the researcher. The principal investigator for this study is an African American female graduate student at the university where the research and data collection took place.

Description of the Study Sample

A limited amount of research has been conducted with African American college students in an effort to gain insight on their alcohol-centered behaviors. The studies that have been done have repeatedly found that members of this population can be classified as low and moderate drinkers, that they are less likely to be at risk for alcohol related problems than Caucasian students, and that they do not binge drink at the same levels of Caucasian students. Another significant finding was that African American women drink the least when Caucasian males,

females, and African American males and females were studied and that in many instances, African American women actually report abstaining from alcohol (Humphrey et al., 1983, Meilman, Presley & Lyerla, 1994). These findings suggested that African American college women would be a suitable group to study in order to identify what role alcohol plays in their social lives and to see if it contributes to the formation of their social bonds. Literature on drinking and college students suggests that Caucasian students form their social bonds and learn appropriate social behaviors in their heavy drinking encounters (Perkins, 1985; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). Studying African American female college students as a representative group of low and moderate drinkers illuminate the issues that play a role in how they form social bonds. Some of these findings can be compared to other low and moderate drinkers to determine if there are similarities in how low and moderate drinkers behave in college.

African American college women were chosen because not only do they report being low and moderate drinkers, they are an easily identifiable group of low and moderate drinkers. Interviewing them as a subculture of college students addressed the issues of alcohol and social bonding among college students who are not excessive drinkers. It also allowed students to address the issue of race and drinking and race and social bonding while attending a predominantly white university. By interviewing this particular segment of the university population, it shed light on what social activities students who are not heavy drinkers take part in, the reasons why they are not heavy drinkers, and how their social lives were affected by heavy drinking students.

These interviews were conducted with a total of 55 African American women undergraduate students who lived in on-campus residences. At the university, 4 interviews were conducted with African American women who were under 21 years of age and 4 were conducted

with African American women who were over 21 years of age. According to previous research (Rapaport et al., 1999), younger students tend to drink differently than older students, typically drinking high levels of alcohol, particularly beer. Dividing the students into these categories addressed the issue of age and the role it played in how college students socially interacted and constructed relationships.

Results and Findings

Social Activities of African American College Women

Social activities significantly centered on being with friends and people who the interviewees considered were close friends and who were similar to them. Students said they liked being in each other's dorm rooms, laughing, joking, playing cards, playing games, listening to music, watching movies, talking, eating, which encompass "chilling out." Shawna said, "We like just being together, listening to music, eating, something like that, doing our thing, laughing, it's just fun." Lucy added, "I think the best place for us to have fun is in the house 'cause it's so silly, we laugh at every little thing, it's so crazy, we have the most fun in the house."

Shevonne and Justine described how much they enjoyed watching movies with their friends. As Shevonne said, "We used to have movie night at Quad 3. We had this one night where we just like watch movies. People would go to Blockbuster and get a movie and everyone would come from Quad 1 and Quad 3 to watch movies. We'd have popcorn, soda, pizza, we'd be just doin' it up." Justine added, "You know, the black people will stay in and you know, watch movies and that's cool." They explained how people enjoyed playing cards, board games, and even creating their own karioke night.

Remy said that even though the campus offered a variety of activities, her most enjoyable times were spent in her apartment with friends. "You could just have your friends over and just

chill in your own apartment and that's not even like a thing of not being sociable 'cause it can be really fun 'cause I mean you have an apartment, you invite people over and you just chill."

Jackie agreed as she described some of the activities in her dorm. "It's just like eating, you talk, you reminisce, you laugh, you make fun of each other, stuff like that, you watch TV." Caprice shared this sentiment saying "Basically me and my friends we just be in the dorm room buggin' watching movies, whatever, listening to music." Ariel focused on the enjoyment of just talking with good friends. "I may be in the room listening to music or we're just talking, like yesterday, we talked for hours, my friends just came by and we talked about everything. We talk about hair, to men, to anything. We'll sit and we'll talk for hours, we get outrageous, racism, everything, we talk about everything, we talk for hours."

This sentiment was echoed several times among interviewees. Many of them described full and active social lives, but the most fun came in informal and even impromptu gatherings as opposed to events actually sponsored by the university or those that took place outside of the university.

Many of these informal gatherings consisted of having good friends in their rooms gathering a group of people and going to dinner together. Shayla felt that the most enjoyable times were with a group of friends. "I love group activities...we watch movies, play video games, drop CDs, things like that or like we'll all get up and go eat at Brower or like, that's a really big thing like oh, let's go, we're going to eat. Everybody would be at the table after you finish eating, you just sit for like an hour and start cracking jokes. It's like you can really make the best of anything with a group of people."

Episodes such as these were considered the favorite of most of the students because they were in comfortable environments, they were having fun, there was not a significant expense attached to what they were doing, and it gave them a chance to unwind and be with each other.

Other social events that the students said they enjoyed were cultural programs. Shevonne said she and her friends found these events to be a lot of fun. "I like karioke night or like open mic night at the coffee house. At open mic night, people come and free style and read poetry." Tammy added, "I love poetry readings, the talent shows, fashion shows." Maxi said she enjoyed the poetry events and made a strong effort to attend them. "There's a lot of poetic events they have like poetry slams, spoken word, music, and me and my friends go to that." Nona and Denise said they also enjoyed the poetry and open mic events. Nona said, "that's another really great thing that Rutgers has, especially on Douglass, where they have the jazz which is like a poethic, like a poetry slam so that's a great evening. Denise said she liked the open mic nights because they are well attended and a lot of fun. She said, "They have a lot of open mic nights, they have some where you know there's talent and you know and then there's some where you just come out and do your thing and I've been to like two of them and they were really good."

Many interviewees said they liked the fact that they lived in close proximity to a variety of restaurants and enjoyed going out with friends to eat. Many area restaurants offered live music so they were able to incorporate those two social activities together. Remy said she likes going into the city of New Brunswick to have a meal and listen to live bands. "From junior year to now, there's been so many restaurants that have opened and on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturday nights they have live jazz bands." Felicia agreed saying "There are many restaurants and I love it. There's a lot of things where you can't go wrong like cafes and they have bands and stuff." Selena also liked the ethnic variety in foods and enjoyed going to local restaurants. She

said, "I like to eat and the fact that there's so many places to eat, I mean, I'll eat Thai food, Indian food, Jamaican food, I've had West Indian food, and it's like you can go from really upscale and more high priced stuff to like Cool Runnings where you can get a beef Patrice or a chicken patty for like \$2.99 which is literally right outside our door."

Some students said they liked to play sports, go to the gym and exercise with a friend or relative, walk around outside with friends when the weather is nice or even take a drive off campus during the warm weather months. As Debra said, "I love to work out and like, they got everything here, everyone of these gyms here, if you wanna sauna, dry sauna, wet sauna, whatever you want, pool, and even if you don't find it in one gym it's at another...they just have so many things here, just like so many things." Some students may go to the student center to play video games or shoot pool with friends, they may go to a sporting event at the university, or they may go off campus to see a movie or go to the mall.

Nikki said that she and her friends like to go to the mall but not very often because they have limited finances. Going to the mall and taking part in games and sporting events was also considered a fun time for Dondi. "I like to go to the mall, shopping, good food and during the day we go play tennis, shot pool or play basketball." Lucy also liked to play games in the student center with her friends. "We'll go to the Rec center, play the games, like racquetball or like go to other campuses you know and look around."

Willa and her friends enjoyed attending sporting events held on the campus and many students said they liked to take day trips to New York City due to its proximity to Rutgers. "I just go to New York and stuff and just chill. I just love New York, I wanna live there. It's like, the culture's cool and everything, you can just walk around there." Liz also enjoyed day trips to New York. "I've been going to New York a lot just to go, anywhere, I don't care where I go, like

the Met you know to go see an art show." Kami added, "I might like to go to New York to see a play or go to the museum or Zimmerli sometimes, they have an exhibit or I might just wanna go to a park just to hang out. I might wanna run, I might wanna just sit in my room and talk on the phone." Hannah and her friends enjoyed going off campus and spending time outside when the weather was warm. She said, "We go shopping sometimes, just walk around when it gets nice outside, drive around."

Many students said they particularly enjoyed special campus-wide outdoor university events that take place during the spring semester once the weather has gotten warmer.

As Felicia said:

That's why I like Rutgers so much, it's just like they're constantly putting on a lot of programs...I don't know if any other schools have them but like "days" they just dedicate like this past Sunday was "Harmony Day this weekend is like "Rutgers Fest" and "Ag Field Day" then followed by "Unity Day.

Sharleen said she enjoyed the special "days" particularly "Unity Day" which was a favorite of many students. She described "Unity Day." "They have concerts, frats and sororities stepping, they have entertainment, they had this comic, they have a lot of vendors come and it's over the radio and they have a lot of free stuff, they have games, too." Ronnie added, "it's like a concert and I mean they just get a lot of people in one area." The special "days" are favorites of Caprice and her friends as well. She explained, "The special events like they have this outside thing "Unity Day," like "Founder's Day." I like those things. Things like that, they don't happen a lot and all the black people will be there so I like to go to those." Roxanne agreed that "Unity Day" was largely attended. She said, "Everybody comes, it's a really big event and it's free."

These events are very popular for black students, especially "Unity Day" because they provide a means for students to come out, socialize with their friends, see friends who they have

not seen in a while, and just have a good time. Respondents stated that events like these assure them that they will be attended by a lot of black students. Caprice stated, "All the black people will be at Unity Day...so I like to go to those." Sabrina concurred, "We're always there, once a year it's like, my god, you all go there and see everybody for one day."

"Partying" On Campus

In addition to the informal social episodes, campus-sponsored events, and off campus activities, parties are a popular mode of enjoyment for on-campus residents. Parties come in several different incarnations but most respondents said they have frequently attended campus parties during their tenure at Rutgers University.

These parties are typically thrown by organizations geared towards African American students, with the majority of the organizations being African American Greek letter organizations. Sabrina said, "They're fraternity parties and because they don't have a house, they have to go to the student center." Many times the parties are held off campus in apartments, dance clubs, or hotels. According to Tamia, "Sometimes they're on campus and they play R and B and Hip Hop and all of that."

Willa and Nikki explained that partying meant dancing which is the primary activity at these parties. As Cici said, "A good party would consist of music, friends and dancing at a club or a campus party." Nikki said in referring to the difference between how she and other blacks party as compared to how Caucasian students party, "When we go to a party, we go there to party."

As Lucy said:

It's a lot different from you know the way Caucasians party...just dancing and having fun, not really drinking, just dancing and having a lot of fun...like the blacks, they don't really have a frat house so you can't drink in the student center, you can't like have mad alcohol in there so it's very different from the Caucasian's 'cause they can bring any

amount of drinks they want 'cause it's their house and they get really filthy drunk and that's all they do, they get drunk, have sex, whatever, but at the student center you can't do that, so you just party, have fun and dance...natural high.

Willa added, "they go there to *drink* [emphasis added] not to go and party and dance."

Tracy said, "when I go to a black party it's like 24-7 dancing and I love it, like I just love dancing, like it's just good for your soul." Laila agreed that the main focus at black parties was dancing. "Like black people they just like to dance, they just like to dance, dance, dance, dance so when they go to a party, they wanna dance and drinking yeah, is on the side but dancing is the main focus. If the music's good, that's all the main focus...it's like black people wanna dance."

Lana said:

I think the difference with black parties, it's more into having good fun, you know what I mean, you see dancing, you see a lot of other things but not mainly we're gonna sit down and just drink like and act stupid, you know.

Jackie agreed saying that dancing was more important to blacks when they go out to party and alcohol plays a very minor role.

Jackie said:

Even a little black party on Livingston, you know, mind you it's on Livingston so of course you know there's not gonna be this ole big ole tons of liquor, but it's the fact that to go to a black party there might be a couple drinks around in the back but it's more music, it's more like everybody's getting their dance on...music is a black thing, there's more music, the music's the thing not the liquor.

The Role of Alcohol and Socializing Among African American College Students

Respondents discussed a variety of issues regarding alcohol and the significance it plays in their college lives. Overall, students explained that they were not heavy drinkers and did not feel a need to have alcohol at a party in order to have a good time.

Cecelia said:

I may drink occasionally now, like if I go somewhere and I may have a sweet drink here and there or like I may go someplace that has a drink minimum or something like that, but I mean, I think like black people, I don't know, they just, they use it to have a good time but they don't feel like they have to drink to have a good time. Like, I have a better time actually when I don't drink.

Since many parties took place in campus facilities, alcohol was not allowed but students said it did not matter because they did not attend the parties in order to drink.

Ariel explained:

A lot of times, I think people drink more water at black parties than at white parties. Like I said I drink more water at black parties and I think one reason is because it's hot. People drink a lot of water at black parties. I just want water. We went to the Ramada and they had the cups out with ice and water. People were just asking for water and cups and I know they didn't make that much money on the bar because a lot of people had cups of water, plain water. I'm sure they made money but not that much because people just bought water because it's hot, it's hot, you just want water, you don't want any alcohol.

The off campus parties in hotels, dance clubs, and in students' apartments were where there would be alcohol, but students would not drink heavily and said they did not feel pressured to drink and did not feel uncomfortable or unpopular if they were not drinking. As Dondi said, "You're not forced to drink if you don't want to. You're actually at a party, it's not like here, you must drink to be here. You come in, you can socialize, you don't have to drink, you can dance." Kami added, "It's completely your choice. No one forces you to drink at all." Many students said that drinking was not the central part of the fun or the reason for having the party. Drinking did not have to take place in order for the groups to have fun and many of them said they have a better time when they do not drink at all. As Jodi said, "Black people really don't need to drink to have a good time, as long as the music's pumpin."

In fact, a person who overindulged in alcohol, got sick, or embarrassed themselves would be seen as more of an outcast as opposed to someone who did not drink at all. Instead, the most

important element to every party is music and if the music is good, then the party is good. The music sets the foundation for socializing and even though some student said they drink socially, "it is not a social activity to drink."

Most students said if they do drink, it is because it is a special occasion e.g. someone's birthday, an end of the semester celebration, a special treat during a night out for dinner, etc. and it would always be with friends, particularly people who they trusted. They stated that when they do drink, it is in small amounts, basically no more than 2 drinks, and it was very important to know their limit. Several respondents said they knew their limits and would not drink anymore than what they knew their bodies could sustain. It was also very important to know what they were drinking and one student even went so far as to say that she and her mother discussed the alcohol content of different drinks so she would know what she was drinking. Anything that had a heavy alcohol content in it was something she chose to stay away from.

Another important factor was having one's senses, knowing what you did during a night out, and being able to remember what happened the next day. Students felt that overindulging meant not being able to make rational decisions, not being able to drive, not having their senses about them, or not knowing what they were doing or why. They did not want to be at that point. They felt that when going out to party, people should be able to "take care of themselves" and not be a burden to friends because they had been drinking too much. People should also present themselves in a positive light and excessive drinking would prohibit them from doing that. As Tamia stated, "Well, if I was to drink I would probably drink like in my room or something like that. I don't wanna go out and act a fool." This rationale provides the reason for why she as well as others do not drink at all. Tamia added, "I don't drink...I mean, I never knew how I would act if I got drunk so I never did it. I never wanted to embarrass myself."

Some students said they do not drink alcohol because they do not like the taste of it and unless they have something that tastes good, then they will not drink. The taste of the drink was a common theme among the participants. Many of them said they only drink sweet drinks like wine coolers, daquiries, and mixed drinks, or as Hannah called them, "cocktaily drinks." Some students admitted drinking "hard liquor" like Hennessey and Alize, but because they liked the taste, not because they wanted to get drunk. One drink that they all agreed they disliked was beer. No one admitted liking beer even though there may be a few bottles at an off campus apartment party, but they did not have kegs where beer was the primary drink. Most respondents said they did not like beer so they did not drink it.

Drinking was something that some students would do to feel social while at parties, to feel a little less inhibited around new people, or to relax. Students expressed in all of the focus groups that they did not need to drink to have a good time and they "never" drank to get drunk. Instead, they said they drink to get a "buzz" or to get "nice," which is described as being a little tipsy and feeling the effects of the alcohol, but being in full control of one's faculties and not getting to a point where a person would pass out or get sick. In fact, behavior like that was severely frowned upon by the study participants.

Students said that behaviors such as "drinking to the point where you're dropping," "throwing up," "drinking to the point where you're puking," "coming back from parties all decked out drunk," "being drunk or sick," "getting wasted," "drinking into a drunken stupor," and "chug a lugging," were unacceptable and they did not like seeing students from other ethnic populations behaving that way.

Although presenting oneself in an appropriate manner was one reason for why they felt strongly about not behaving that way, they also felt that drinking in those manners did not equate with fun or having a good time.

According to Hannah:

We don't ever want to get so messed up that people are throwing up...that's never happened 'cause that's not something that any of us want to be around...that's when the morale goes down and it's not fun anymore.

Some students went even so far as to say that looking good was very important when they go out and no one wanted to "puke on your clothes." Looking good was more important than being drunk or sick so students chose not to get drunk when they went out.

Another sentiment shared by the respondents was not wanting to drink in an unfamiliar environment or around strangers. They explained that they did not want to accept a drink while at a club or an apartment party because they did not know what was in the drink and did not want to run the risk of getting drugged or taken advantage of. Instead, if they were going to drink, they would rather do it at home with friends.

Nikki explained:

When you bring other people into it or strangers or people that you really don't consider your friends, you're really putting yourself at risk 'cause you don't know who's gonna seriously take care of you and who's gonna be there when you get sick or when you need someone.

Students also resisted drinking in clubs because of the expense attached to the drinks. This was one reason that some students said they actually drink before they go out. According to Janet, "When I go out, before I go out I'll drink because I'm not paying like 8 dollars for a Long Island Iced Tea or something like that." Since alcohol is prohibited in on campus facilities,

students who like to drink will drink before they attend those parties as well. The effects of the alcohol usually wear off during the party because of all the dancing the students engage in.

Within the African American college student community, students said they very rarely see blacks lose control when they are drinking. The reasons for this were twofold. One reason was simply that drinking in that manner was not considered socially acceptable and the majority of the black students just did not want to drink excessively and did not see the fun in getting drunk. But another reason that was discussed in some of the focus groups was that they felt they were targeted by the local police as well as the campus police, and they would get into trouble if they behaved wildly. Shevonne said, "We know how to hold it down, we know our limits because we don't wanna get in trouble."

Conclusions

African American women in this study found alcohol to be part of the background of their social activities, placing dancing to good music and "hanging out" with good friends in the forefront. Although several respondents admitted drinking in order to be "sociable," they did not see it as a social facilitator or as a necessary element for having a good time or meeting people.

These interviewees suggest that drinking for blacks takes place within friendship interactions as opposed to before the interactions. They also suggest that the bonds are in place prior to drinking encounters, therefore providing a safe space and safe environment for friends who do want to drink. Social bonds for these students do take place in social interactions, but the interactions do not include alcohol to facilitate relationships and strengthen the bonds. Instead, the lack of alcohol may strengthen the bond. These students' responses suggest that alcohol does not play the role of the glue that fuses the bond together as it has been suggested by research conducted with excessive drinking Caucasian students.

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