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Alcohol abuse as a rite of passage: The effect of beliefs about alcohol and the college experience on undergraduates’ drinking behaviors

Lizabeth A. Crawford, Katherine B. Novak

Abstract

Qualitative studies of alcohol’s ritual influences indicate that college undergraduates who drink heavily tend to view alcohol use as integral to the student role and feel entitled to drink irresponsibly. Our analyses, based on a standardized measure of these beliefs administered to approximately 300 students, confirmed these findings. Among our sample, beliefs about alcohol and the college experience had an effect on levels of alcohol consumption similar in magnitude to that of other variables commonly associated with a risk for heavy drinking. Moreover, the alcohol beliefs index moderated the effects of three risk factors—gender, high school drinking, and friends’ use of alcohol—on respondents’ drinking behaviors. These findings are discussed within the context of the anthropological literature on liminality and rites of passage and with regard to strategies for intervention that address the structural roots of the widespread abuse of alcohol on college campuses.

Given the harms associated with the abuse of alcohol on college campuses, including secondhand effects on individuals who abstain or drink moderately at schools where heavy drinking is common (Wechsler, 1996; Wechsler, Lee, Nelson, & Kuo, 2002), many institutions now have specific policies designed to reduce student alcohol abuse (Wechsler, Kelley, Weitzman, Giovanni, & Seibring, 2000). Despite this, the rate of heavy, or binge, drinking at this nation’s colleges and universities has remained stable at about 44%. Moreover, both the percentage of frequent binge drinkers and drinkers who report consuming alcohol for the explicit purpose of becoming intoxicated have increased since the early 1990s (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Seibring, Nelson, & Lee, 2002). Emphasizing the sense of entitlement to alcohol common among college students, along with alcohol’s social functions, the ritual influence model (Treise, Wolburg & Otnes, 1999; Wolburg, 2001) provides insight into why the abuse of alcohol on college campuses remains so prevalent.

Alcohol’s Ritual Functions

Within any group, and society in general, shared beliefs and behaviors facilitate bonds between individuals and serve as a source of social identity. Rituals, defined as repetitive activities with an underlying symbolic content, provide people with a sense of belonging, predictability, and emotional well-being (Driver, 1991). Driver (1991) refers to these functions as community, order and transformation, respectively.
Using qualitative data collected from focus groups consisting of students identified as binge drinkers, Treise et al. (1999) found substantial support for their application of Driver's (1991) model to college undergraduates’ drinking behaviors. Wolburg's (2001) follow-up study, using a similar methodology, further confirms the utility of this perspective. As hypothesized, desires to “fit in” socially (community), reductions in uncertainty in social situations through the enactment of “scripted” drinking routines (order), and stress reduction (transformation) were some of the most commonly cited motives for drinking among the 81 study participants.

Many of these aspects of campus drinking rituals have been addressed by quantitative analyses of the determinants of alcohol use among college undergraduates. Research on the effects of perceived peer drinking on students’ use of alcohol (e.g., Baer, Stacy & Larimer, 1991) captures the community-based aspect of ritualized drinking (Treise et al., 1999; Wolburg, 2001). Moreover, studies of the alcohol expectancy-drinking relationship, in particular analyses linking expectations of relaxation and increased assertiveness to high levels of alcohol consumption (e.g., Carey, 1995), reflects the function of rituals Driver (1991) calls transformation.

Beliefs About Alcohol and the College Experience: Alcohol Abuse as a Rite of Passage

Despite their potential influence on students’ drinking patterns, other beliefs in support of campus drinking rituals have been overlooked within the quantitative literature. Wolburg’s (2001) data, in particular, suggest that students who drink heavily do so in part, because they believe that alcohol abuse is integral to the college experience. Many participants in this study indicated that college is the timeframe within which people have both the freedom and flexibility to drink heavily with few negative consequences. They also stated that it is important for students to take advantage of this opportunity to enjoy life before moving into more restrictive adult roles.

Clearly these beliefs are rooted in the perception that college student is a transitory status. Given this, a particular type of ritual process, rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1960), may be of relevance to the college experience (Butler, 1993; CASA, 1994; Treise et al., 1999).

Across cultures, rites of passage are characterized by three stages through which individuals become separated from and then reintegrated into the larger social system. It is during the second phase of this process (the liminal stage), when individuals are segregated from and perceived as distinct from the broader community, that the nonnative constraints characteristic of society more generally become less relevant and thus lose some of their regulatory power (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960).

Modern industrial societies lack the formalized rites of passage embedded within religion and the family that commonly symbolize the transition to adulthood within primitive cultures. As a result, youth have themselves created secularized rituals that demark their movement into adulthood. These forms of ritual expression often involve the use of alcohol and drugs, which
both reflect and facilitate their temporary segregation from the broader social order (Butler, 1993; Coontz, 1993; Pedersen, 1992).

In Norway, for example, graduating students throughout the country participate in a tradition referred to as “russefeiring,” a 17 day celebration involving public drunkenness and the violation of social norms, which marks their impending transition into adult work roles. The ceremonies begin on May 1st and continue until May 17th, Norway’s National Independence Day, at which point the graduates become reintegrated into the larger community, symbolized by their participation in the Independence Day Parade.

The tradition of russefeiring clearly reflects the functions of rituals identified by Driver (1991). Participants in this ritual process typically forge strong bonds that result in lifelong friendships (community). Prior to the onset of the russefeiring celebration, committees of recent graduates develop behavioral scripts, designed to govern the rule-breaking element of the ceremony, by identifying the most desirable transgressions and establishing a system of symbolic rewards for those individuals who are the most successful in achieving these aims (order). Transformation occurs when graduates, in a state of drunkenness, become free of the normative constraints that typically regulate community members’ public behaviors (Sande, 2002).

As such, russefeiring, as a rite of passage, is rooted in the shared understanding among societal members of the rights and responsibilities (or lack thereof) associated with a liminal experience. It is the fact that participants in this ritual are between statuses, an “interstructural situation” (Turner, 1969), which legitimates the violation of community norms and provides a protected space within which graduates are free to transgress without negative consequences.

Tsuda (1993) has applied a similar model to Japanese students. He argues that Japanese universities provide a social context within which the normative expectations of the broader society are temporarily suspended. Given their liminal standing, students are free to engage in a range of activities that would otherwise result in social rejection and/or more formal sanctions.

The concept of liminality is also of relevance to the American college experience (Butler, 1993). The qualitative literature reviewed earlier suggests that many students perceive themselves to be in a unique situation, albeit temporary, within which heavy drinking is both an acceptable and desirable activity. Moreover, there was a shared understanding among the participants in both Treise et al.’s (1999) and Wolburg's (2001) earlier studies, that college campuses provide a safe environment for heavy drinking and support a social context within which people excuse “bad” or inappropriate behavior resulting from alcohol intoxication.

Typical of research conducted within this tradition, the samples upon which these studies were based (small numbers of heavy drinkers) were limited. Thus, they did not allow for the assessment of the broader applicability of beliefs about alcohol and the college experience as rationales for alcohol abuse or their relationship to other risk factors for heavy drinking. We address these issues in this article.
Study Purpose

Using a standardized measure, we examined the extent to which college undergraduates view alcohol abuse as integral to the student role and assessed the utility of this construct as a predictor of their drinking behaviors. We also tested for mediating and moderating relationships between other variables associated with a risk for heavy drinking (gender, high school alcohol use, participation in the Greek system, and peer drinking), beliefs about alcohol and the college experience, and levels of alcohol consumption.

Methods

Participants

During the fall of 2002, the authors administered a comprehensive survey form (including measures of students’ demographic characteristics, alcohol use, and a range of social-psychological indicators) in a number of lower-level social science courses at a medium-sized, private Midwestern University. Although all of the students present in the classes in which the survey was given opted to complete the questionnaire, there was the usual rate of absences (about 5-10% of students per session) across classes. This, along with the fact that students taking introductory courses in sociology, psychology and political science are not necessarily representative of all undergraduate students at this university, must be taken into consideration when interpreting the results of this survey. In total, 318 undergraduate students completed the survey form. Given our focus on campus drinking, we dropped 25 respondents who were nontraditional students (i.e., individuals who were in their 30s) or did not report their age on the survey questionnaire, yielding a sample size of 293 (118 males and 175 females).

Measures

Beliefs about Alcohol and the College Experience (BACE)—The extent to which respondents’ believed that alcohol use is integral to the college experience and that students are entitled to drink irresponsibly, our key independent variable, was measured using six items that emerged as reflective of this perception in Wolburg’s (2001) qualitative study of alcohol’s ritual functions (see Appendix). Each question was scored using a 4-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree.” An analysis of internal consistency indicated that this measure had a high degree of reliability among the undergraduates surveyed (Alpha = .81).

Other Risk Factors—Our other independent variables included: gender, pre-college drinking, participation in the Greek system, friends’ drinking behaviors, and perceived campus drinking norms. Gender, respondents’ pre-college drinking status (didn’t drink in H.S., drank in H.S.) and participation in the Greek system were coded as dummy variables. Friends’ drinking was measured using students’ responses to the following question: “My friends drink a lot.” Scores on this variable ranged from 1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree.” Perceived campus drinking norms, a second measure of peer drinking, was constructed using three questions requiring participants to estimate the number of alcoholic drinks the “typical” student at their
university drinks during an average week, the number of drinks a “typical” student drinks at one sitting, and the number of times a “typical” student drank to intoxication during the month prior to the administration of the survey (see Baer, Stacy & Larimer, 1991 for a similar operational definition of this construct). Each indicator was standardized to give an equal weight to each of the three items and then combined into a composite drinking-norms index (Alpha = .77). In addition to being a “risk factor”, this variable, as well as the measure of friends’ drinking behaviors, served as a control for the ritual function of alcohol referred to as community by Driver (1991).

Alcohol Expectancies—Two measures of respondents’ perceptions of the physiological and social consequences of alcohol intoxication were included in all higher-order analyses to control for the ritual function of alcohol termed transformation. The first of these variables was constructed by adding the nine relaxation items from the Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire (AEQ) (Brown, Christiansen & Goldman, 1987) and indicates the extent to which people believe that consuming alcohol reduces tension. The second measure, the sum of respondents’ scores on the ten social assertiveness items from the AEQ, assesses the degree to which individuals think that drinking enhances the quality of their social interactions. Each of the expectancy questions was coded as either 0 (“disagree”) or 1 (“agree”), yielding composite scores ranging from 0-9 on the relaxation, and 0 to 10 on the social assertiveness, subscale. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Carey, 1995; Goldman, Greenbaum & Darkes, 1997; O’Hare, 1990), both AEQ subscales exhibited a moderate to high degree of reliability among this sample of college undergraduates (Alpha = .79 for relaxation and Alpha = .89 for social assertiveness).

Alcohol Use—Our dependent variable was based on respondents’ answers to four questions reflecting the frequency and magnitude of their drinking (see Appendix). Responses to these items were standardized, giving them equal weight, and then summed to form a composite drinking index with scores ranging from -3.26 to 20.26 (Alpha = .92). Students who reported that they never used alcohol were assigned the value of 0 on this measure.

Results

Descriptive statistics on the variables included in this analysis are presented in Table 1. As shown here, the mean score of 12 on the alcohol beliefs measure was well below the scale midpoint of 15, suggesting that many students do not view alcohol use as integral to the college experience. Nonetheless, bivariate correlations (Table 2) revealed that those individuals who perceived alcohol abuse as part of being a student tended to be heavy drinkers ($r = .55, p < .001$), and that beliefs about alcohol and the college experience were more strongly related to levels of alcohol consumption than any of the other risk factors examined.

The correlation coefficients presented in Table 2 also provide some insight into the characteristics of students who are most likely to perceive abusive drinking and its consequences as legitimate. Although gender (male > female), Greek participation and the perception that alcohol use is common on campus were associated with high scores on the BACE index, pre-
college drinking and having heavy drinking friends were the two characteristics most strongly related to the belief that alcohol is integral to the college experience ($r = .42, p < .001$, $r = .43, p < .001$, respectively). As expected, the belief that alcohol abuse is part of college life was positively associated with both expectancy subscales, the two measures of alcohol’s transformative function.

Hierarchical OLS regression was used to assess the relative effects of beliefs about alcohol and the college experience and our other independent variables on students’ drinking behaviors and to test for mediating and moderating relationships. In an initial analysis, we entered all of the independent variables, with the exception of the alcohol beliefs measure, into the regression model (Table 3, column 1). In a second step, we added the alcohol beliefs index into the regression, so that we could assess the predictive utility of this measure, above and beyond that of our other independent variables, and test for mediating effects (Table 3, column 2). In a third series of analyses, we tested the significance of cross-product interactions between beliefs about alcohol and the college experience, each of the other independent variables (gender, pre-college drinking status, Greek participation, friends’ drinking, and perceived campus drinking norms), and levels of alcohol consumption (Table 3, columns 3-5).

Consistent with the results of earlier studies (see e.g., Leibsohn, 1994; Lo, 1995; Meilman, Leichliter, & Presley, 1999; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Sebring, Nelson, & Lee 2002; Yu & Shacket, 2001) males, earlier drinkers, participants in the Greek system, and individuals who believed that the use of alcohol was common among friends and on campus more generally were all at risk for heavy drinking. As shown in column 1 of Table 3, predictor variables explained approximately half of the variation in respondents’ drinking behaviors ($R^2 = .49, p < .001$).

As shown in column 2 of Table 3, the BACE index explained an additional 2.8% of the variation in alcohol use scores. Moreover, the effect of this variable on students’ drinking behaviors (Beta = .21, $p < .001$) was similar in magnitude to that of the other risk factors included in the statistical model.
Table 2. Bivariate Correlations

<table>
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<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<th>6</th>
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<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Female</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Drank in High School</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Greek Participation</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Friends’ Drinking</td>
<td>-.26***</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Perceived Campus Drinking Norms</td>
<td>-.20**</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. AEQ Relaxation Subscale</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.35***</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. AEQ Assertion Subscale</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.59***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. BACE Index</td>
<td>-.24***</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Drinking Index</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: AEQ = Alcohol Expectancies Questionnaire; BACE = Beliefs about Alcohol and the College Experience

*** p < .001
** p < .01
* p < .05

Table 3. OLS Regressions Predicting Levels of Alcohol Consumption (n = 293)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.61***</td>
<td>-5.43***</td>
<td>-8.35</td>
<td>-4.11***</td>
<td>-.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-1.73***</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-1.58***</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>3.00*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drank in HS</td>
<td>1.70***</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>1.30***</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>1.40***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek Participation</td>
<td>1.33***</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>1.10**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>1.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends’ Drinking</td>
<td>.96***</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.78***</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.75***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Campus</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking Norms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation Subscale</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertion Subscale</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACE Index</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACE*Female</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACE*Drink HS</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BACE*Friend Use</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>R-Square</td>
<td>.490***</td>
<td>.518***</td>
<td>.544***</td>
<td>.526***</td>
<td>.538***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: BACE = Beliefs about Alcohol and the College Experience

*** p < .001
** p < .01
* p < .05

Despite this, and strong positive correlations between scores on the BACE index and each of the latter measures (Table 2), a comparison of the coefficients presented in columns 2 and 1 of Table 3 offers little evidence of any mediating influences. Although the effects of gender, high school drinking status, Greek participation, friends’ use of alcohol, and perceived campus drinking norms on levels of alcohol consumption decreased when the BACE index was added into the
regression model, these changes were minimal. This suggests that the perception that alcohol abuse is integral to the role of student did not account for the effects of these other risk factors on respondents’ drinking practices.

Beliefs about alcohol and the college experience did, however, moderate the relationship between three of the latter variables—gender, pre-college drinking status, and friends’ use of alcohol—and students’ drinking behaviors. These effects are presented in columns 3, 4 and 5 of Table 3. As shown here, the interaction between gender, alcohol beliefs, and alcohol consumption was especially strong. Together, the BACE index and the gender by BACE interaction term explained over 5% of the variability in students’ levels of alcohol consumption.

Using the unstandardized regression equations from column 3 of Table 3 we determined the nature of the gender-BACE-alcohol use interaction by computing predicted drinking scores for males and then females with low (one standard deviation below the mean) versus high (one standard deviation above the mean) scores on the HACE index, while all other variables were held constant at their sample mean (Table 1). We used an identical procedure to discern the nature of the other two significant interaction terms, based on the unstandardized regression equations from column 4 and 5 of Table 3, respectively. In the latter case, values on the measure of friends' drinking were varied from 1 (low) to 4 (high).\(^1\)

The predicted drinking scores generated in the manner described above are presented graphically in Figures 1-3. As shown in Figure 1, beliefs about alcohol and the college experience had a substantially larger effect on levels of alcohol consumption among males than among females. Moreover, while males who perceived alcohol abuse to be integral to the role of student were at a greater risk for heavy drinking than their female counterparts, there was virtually no gender difference in levels of alcohol consumption among students who rejected the notion.

The effect of high school alcohol use on levels of drinking was also smaller among individuals who did not associate alcohol abuse with the student role than it was among respondents who believed heavy drinking to be a legitimate campus activity. This was due to the somewhat stronger relationship between the latter perception and alcohol use among early drinkers (Figure 2).

An examination of the interaction between friends' use of alcohol, alcohol beliefs, and composite drinking scores was yielded a similar pattern. As shown in Figure 3, friends’ use of alcohol was associated with a risk for heavy drinking, but only among individuals who believed that alcohol abuse was integral to college life. In this case, beliefs about alcohol and the college experience did not affect respondents’ levels of alcohol consumption unless they had friends who drank heavily.

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\(^1\) See Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber (1983) for a more detailed discussion of this method for interpreting cross-product interaction terms.
Figure 1. Estimated effects of beliefs about alcohol and the college experience on levels of alcohol consumption by gender ($n = 293$)

Figure 2. Estimated effects of beliefs about alcohol and the college experience on levels of alcohol consumption by high school alcohol use ($n = 293$)
Figure 3. Estimated effects of beliefs about alcohol and the college experience on levels of alcohol consumption by friends’ use of alcohol (n = 293)

Discussion

Consistent with the notion that alcohol abuse on college campuses has become a rite of passage, qualitative studies of alcohol's ritual influences indicate that many students who drink heavily view alcohol use as integral to the college experience and feel entitled to drink irresponsibly (Treise et al., 1999; Wolburg, 2001). Our analyses, based on a standardized measure of these beliefs administered to approximately 300 students, confirmed these findings. While many students do not hold this view, beliefs about alcohol and the college experience had an effect on students’ drinking behaviors similar in magnitude to that of other risk factors for alcohol abuse commonly employed within the quantitative literature.

As expected, gender (male > female), drinking before college, participating in the Greek system, having heavy drinking friends, and believing that alcohol use is a common campus activity were all associated with the perception that alcohol abuse is integral to the role of student. This orientation did not, however, account for these individuals’ high levels of alcohol consumption. The fact that alcohol beliefs failed to mediate the relationship between Greek participation and levels of drinking was especially surprising given the centrality of alcohol use to Greek life on many campuses (Cashin, Presley & Meilman, 1998). There was also no evidence that Greek participants were any more reactive to the perception that alcohol abuse is a part of the college experience than other respondents.
This pattern of results may reflect regulations concerning Greek participation on the campus at which our data were collected as well as methodological issues. At the university at which we administered our survey, students are not allowed to pledge a fraternity or sorority until their sophomore year. Since our sample consisted of predominately underclassmen, the data were collected toward the beginning of the fall semester, and our measure of Greek participation included members of fraternities and sororities as well as pledges, many of our respondents may have been new recruits and not yet been fully integrated into Greek life. The fact that Greek affiliation itself had a substantially smaller effect on levels of alcohol consumption than that observed within the literature supports this interpretation.

Although the impact of Greek participation on alcohol use was additive across beliefs about alcohol and the college experience, the latter measure did condition the effects of three other risk factors—gender, high school drinking, and friends’ use of alcohol—on respondents’ drinking behaviors. The moderating influence of alcohol beliefs on the relationship between gender and alcohol use is especially notable given both its magnitude and potential theoretical implications.

Prevailing gender role expectations regulating behaviors commonly affected by alcohol intoxication (e.g., sexuality and aggression) are typically less restrictive for men than women (Gravitt & Krueger, 1997). As a result, males who perceive that alcohol is integral to the student role may be more likely than females to enact this belief by drinking heavily. On the other hand, beliefs about alcohol and the college experience may more readily affect males’ levels of alcohol consumption because they experience more social pressure to drink than their female counterparts (see e.g., Suls & Green, 2003).

A third possibility is that the interaction between gender, alcohol beliefs, and levels of alcohol consumption is a measurement artifact. Students tend to use males as a frame of reference when responding to questions about common campus drinking practices (Lewis & Neighbors, 2004). It seems likely that this type of bias would also occur when students answer questions concerning their beliefs about alcohol use. If this is the case, then the women in our sample may have reported their beliefs about the importance of alcohol to the experiences of college males rather than to themselves. This would explain the minimal effect of this variable on their drinking behaviors. The literature on perceived campus drinking norms supports this interpretation. Future research is needed to determine whether the moderating influence of beliefs about alcohol and the college experience on the gender-alcohol use relationship observed among our study respondents reflects the (gender-nonspecific) nature of our measure or actual gender differences in the freedoms and/or obligations associated with the student status.

While perceived campus drinking norms were more strongly associated with males’ levels of alcohol consumption in studies using gender nonspecific measures (Lo, 1995; Read et al., 2002), a comparable gender-specific measure was a better predictor of females’ drinking behaviors (Lewis & Neighbors, 2004).
The mechanism underlying the moderating effect of alcohol beliefs on the relationship between high school drinking and respondents’ levels of alcohol consumption is more readily apparent. Insofar as the perception that college is a timeframe during which heavy drinking is appropriate legitimates this behavior, one would expect students who drank in high school to be at a greater risk for alcohol abuse if they subscribed to this perspective.

The third interaction, between beliefs about alcohol and the college experience friends’ drinking and students’ personal use of alcohol is perhaps our most interesting finding. Viewing heavy drinking as integral to college life increased levels of alcohol consumption only among respondents with friends who drank heavily. This was not the case when broader campus drinking norms served as a measure of peer drinking, suggesting that beliefs about the appropriateness of alcohol abuse become activated within the context of students’ more immediate social networks. In addition, the fact that friends’ use of alcohol had little effect on levels of alcohol consumption among respondents who rejected the notion that heavy drinking is part of the student role indicates that the concept of peer pressure may not itself provide an adequate explanation for the prevalence of alcohol abuse on college campuses.

Given this, alcohol-reduction initiatives focusing only on peer drinking may be misguided. Across schools, interventions targeting students’ perceptions of prevailing drinking norms have been relatively ineffective in producing widespread changes in campus drinking practices (Wechsler et al., 2003). Other common prevention efforts (e.g., increased penalties associated with campus alcohol violations and educational strategies emphasizing the risks associated with alcohol abuse) have also failed to significantly alter students’ patterns of alcohol consumption (Wechsler, Lee, & Kuo, 2002; Wechsler, Lee, Nelson, & Kuo, 2002). This is not surprising given their failure to consider the structural causes of undergraduate drinking as well as alcohol’s ritual functions (Butler, 1993). Two proposed interventions address these issues.

Emphasizing the liminal nature of the student status, Butler (1993) advocates replacing binge drinking with substance-free rites of passage as a way to reduce the prevalence of alcohol abuse on college campuses. Alternative rites of passage might include initiation rituals passed on from upper to underclassmen through university-supported mentoring systems (Butler, 1993) and/or regularly scheduled events marking transitions in the academic calendar (e.g., the end of midterm examinations). Such events can provide opportunities for social interaction not centered on drinking as alternative contexts within which students can derive social identities and bond with others. Insofar as these activities fulfill alcohol’s other ritual functions, namely order and transformation, they may more readily serve as substitutes for episodes of heavy drinking.

As rites of passage, these alternative rituals must be universal, rigorous, meaningful, and rigidly enforced (Butler, 1993). While many institutions sponsor alcohol-free social and cultural events, they tend to be relatively narrow in scope (see e.g., Davies & Besemer, 1999; Maney et al., 2002). Moreover, students who drink heavily may select activities compatible with alcohol use over substance-free alternatives because they expect them to be more enjoyable (Correia, Carey, Simons, & Bosari, 2003; Turrisi, 1999). This may make it difficult to institutionalize alcohol-free
rites of passage that are viewed as legitimate and adhered to by the entire student body. Given this, a second approach, emphasizing students’ integration into the broader community, may provide a more pragmatic way to address the undergraduate alcohol problem.

College students who work or participate in other structured and purposeful interactions exhibit lower levels of substance use than other individuals (CASA, 1994; Hawdon, 1999; Venable, 1998; Weitzman & Chen, 2005; Weitzman & Kawachi, 2000). Presumably these types of activities provide sources of identification and social obligation that challenge the perception that students, as members of a marginal category, are unconstrained by broader societal norms promoting social responsibility. Drawing on Putnam (1993) and others, Weitzman and associates (Weitzman & Chen, 2005; Weitzman & Kawachi, 2000) refer to these resources as social capital. Social capital—defined as civic engagement, volunteerism, and levels of trust—is rooted in informal as well as formal connections between individuals. These social ties cultivate a sense of belonging among community members and increase their commitment to broader social norms (Putnam, 1993). As such, social capital decreases the likelihood of youths engaging in short-sighted risky and/or destructive activities (Putnam, 1995).

The protective effects of social capital at the campus level on the risk for binge drinking are especially impressive. Although school social capital, measured as average volunteer hours, did not reduce students’ likelihoods of using alcohol responsibly, individuals attending colleges where volunteering was common were less likely to be binge drinkers (Weitzman & Kawachi, 2000), engaged in fewer episodes of heavy drinking, experienced fewer alcohol-related harms, and were at a lower risk for the secondhand effects of others’ abusive drinking practices than students at low-volunteer institutions, irrespective of their personal levels of volunteer service. The magnitude of each of these effects was substantial with even minimal (e.g., a quarter-hour per day) increases in school social capital. Moreover, school (but not individual) social capital moderated the effect of Greek participation on heavy drinking, reducing the risk for alcohol abuse among these individuals to that of students not affiliated with the Greek system (Weitzman & Chen, 2005).

Given their findings, Weitzman and Chen (2005) propose mandatory service requirements as a strategy for reducing the prevalence of heavy drinking among Greek participants and among the general undergraduate population. The two defining characteristics of liminality are segregation and a lack of normative constraint (Turner, 1969). By counteracting these tendencies, service requirements may reduce the centrality of alcohol use to the student identity. Our findings suggest that males and individuals who use alcohol in high school, two groups at risk for heavy drinking, may also respond well to this type of policy.

Methodological limitations render this, as well as our earlier conclusions, somewhat speculative. Given the non-representative nature of our sample, our results may lack generalizability to the student body at the school at which our data were collected as well as to undergraduates at other institutions. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of our survey makes it impossible to discern the temporal order of our key variables.
Future research might focus on reevaluating the relationship between the students’ beliefs about alcohol and the college experience and their drinking behaviors using longitudinal data. Additional studies are also needed to assess the link between social capital and the perception that alcohol abuse is integral to campus life. Such analyses could provide insight into why service activities are so effective in reducing students’ risks for heavy drinking. They might also inform policy decisions by providing a means for identifying other social roles likely to reduce the prevalence of alcohol abuse on college campuses.

Appendix: Alcohol and the College Experience (Adapted from Wolburg, 2001)

[1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree]

1. Drinking makes for great stories and offers the best memories of college life.
2. As college students, we have the freedom to drink.
3. College is the best time in our life for drinking.
4. Nothing else compares with the sensation or thrill you get when you drink.
5. Drinking allows college students to live life to the fullest.
6. Alcohol excuses bad behavior.

Alcohol Use

1. How many alcohol beverages do you consume in an average week (Mon. - Sun.)?
2. When you drink alcohol, how many drinks do you usually consume at one sitting?
3. How many times have you been intoxicated during the past month?
4. How many days during the past two weeks did you have five or more drinks in one sitting?

References


3 Item from the CORE Alcohol and Drug Survey (Preslely, Meilman, & Lyerla, 1994).


