College Women's Experiences and Perceptions of Drinking: A Phenomenological Exploration

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Abstract:

College women's drinking rates are increasing, yet there is limited research on what is contributing to this phenomenon. In this study, the authors explored a fuller picture of how college women experience and perceive drinking situations. Qualitative data from 2 focus groups of high-risk and low-risk drinkers were analyzed with interpretative phenomenological analysis. Similarities and contrasts are discussed, implications for college counselors are highlighted, and areas for future research are recommended.

Keywords: college women | drinking | interpretative phenomenological analysis | perceptions

Article:

College drinking remains a pressing problem and a top concern among college counselors and student development personnel, because drinking has a negative impact on the academic, mental health, social, and physical domains of college students (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2011; Association of University and College Counseling Center Directors, 2012). High-risk (HR) drinking in college populations has been well documented, although the studies have primarily focused on men's alcohol-related consequences, rates of dependence, and HR behaviors. Researchers over the past 30 years have concluded that college men drink at higher rates, drink more frequently, and have more serious alcohol-related problems compared with college women (Likis-Werle, 2012). In fact, being female traditionally has been considered a protective factor against drinking problems and alcoholism (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2002; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [NIAAA], 2002; Wechsler et al., 2002). In recent years, however, college women's drinking rates have been converging with college men's drinking rates (ACHA, 2011; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenburg, & Miech, 2014), and college women's HR drinking rose while college men's drinking rates

remained fairly steady. Several researchers found no gender difference in drinking rates in Caucasian college women and men (LaBrie, Huchting, et al., 2007; Piane & Safer, 2008).

There is scarce empirical literature specifically examining why female drinking rates have risen and what elements contribute to this increase. Consequently, the substance abuse literature is stunted by the lack of attention to how women may approach drinking choices differently from men. Studies of college men suggest drinking motivations such as asserting power, achieving positive enhancement, and adhering to masculine social norms (Capraro, 2000; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004). These motivations, however, may not apply to women; there may be unique social and environmental factors affecting women's drinking choices. Accordingly, the NIAAA (2007) and other researchers (W. B. Smith & Weisner, 2000) have identified subgroups, such as college women, as a critical focus for future alcohol research. Piane and Safer (2008) concluded that more research is needed to examine the specific cultural, gender, societal, and peer influences that contribute to the increase in female drinking rates. Similarly, Ricciardelli, Connor, Williams, and Young (2001) stated that women's drinking is more complex than men's drinking and "needs to be studied in its own right" (p. 135).

A few qualitative researchers have explored the meaning, purpose, language, and experience specific to college women's drinking (Lyons & Willott, 2008; MacNeela & Bredin, 2010; M. A. Smith & Berger, 2010; Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, & D'Arcy, 2005). Across these studies, researchers have identified themes of storytelling, bonding, caretaking, and connecting, as well as concepts of sexual attractiveness and gaining social status or power within a male-dominated drinking context. Other themes emphasize freedom, fun, and rebellion as young women experiment both socially and sexually when they drink. These results suggest women's drinking behavior and motivations focus on connection and relationship, very different drivers from those of men. Participants in most of these qualitative studies, however, were members of the same sorority or existing friendship groups. Results may have been influenced by the women's shared culture and group social norms. Of the two studies conducted in the United States, one was in the Northeast and one in the Midwest. College women in other geographical areas, particularly the South, may be influenced by different cultural expectations of drinking.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore a fuller picture of how college women experience and perceive drinking situations. Given the embryonic status of research in this area, we chose a qualitative approach—interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008)—to illuminate college women's meaning making around their experiences and drinking choices. Our methodology expanded on previous studies in several ways. First, we recruited women who were not part of an organized, established social group so that familiarity with each other and existing shared norms were not present. Second, we invited women attending a college in the Southeast to participate, a group not previously studied. Third, we divided participants into two groups, low-risk (LR) and high-risk (HR) drinkers, to explore differences based on their different drinking behaviors and risk level.

Method

Participants

Participants were nine full-time female undergraduate students attending a midsized public university in the southeastern United States, including 1st-year ($n = 3$), 2nd-year ($n = 2$), 3rd-year ($n = 2$), and 4th-year ($n = 2$) students. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years ($M = 19.56$, $SD = 1.01$). Six were Caucasian, two were African American, and one was American Indian. Each self-identified as a "current drinker," defined as having had at least one alcoholic drink in the last 2 weeks. One participant was a sorority member, and none reported other club or team membership. The number of participants aligns with recommendations for sample sizes in qualitative methodologies such as phenomenology, in which detailed descriptions are gathered from a smaller, purposeful population (Creswell, 2007; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). With 18,000 students located in an urban area of the third largest city in the state, the university had 19 fraternities and sororities and 17 NCAA Division I athletics teams.

Measures

Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). The AUDIT (Saunders, Aasland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993) was developed to screen for hazardous drinking rather than only higher end addiction; it was normed on respondents from six countries and showed similar results across cultures. Reinert and Allen (2007) comprehensively reviewed 18 studies using the AUDIT since 2002 across populations and settings; they reported a "median reliability coefficient of 0.83, with a range of 0.75 to 0.97" (p. 186) and concluded that the AUDIT is "psychometrically sound, brief, easy to score, relatively free of cultural of bias" (p. 197). In addition, the AUDIT is the most commonly used measure in college drinking literature (Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008). The 10-item questionnaire measures one's risk level based on frequency, amount, and consequences of alcohol use. Points from 0 to 4 are assigned based on respondents' answers (e.g., "How many drinks containing alcohol do you have on a typical day when you are drinking? $0 = none$, $4 = 10$ or more"; "How often during the last year have you been unable to remember what happened the night before because you had been drinking? $0 = never$, $4 = daily$ or almost daily"). Total scores range from 0 to 40, with a cutoff of HR drinking at 8 or higher. However, researchers have argued for a lower cutoff score for women to account for biological and physiological differences, increasing scale sensitivity (e.g., DeMartini & Carey, 2012; Olthuis, Zamboanga, Ham, & Van Tyne, 2011). Thus, the recommended cutoff score of 7 was used in our study to assign participants to either the HR focus group (score of 7+) or the LR focus group (score between 0 and 6).

Demographic questionnaire. Participants reported their sex, age, year in school, race/ethnicity, affiliation with organizations (e.g., athletic teams, sororities, student clubs), current drinking frequency, and amount consumed in a typical sitting. This information was used to verify inclusion criteria of being a current drinker between the ages of 18 and 24. Because this developmental time frame of traditional-age college students has been argued as a part of the social context for the phenomenon being investigated, we intentionally narrowed the age range. (Johnston et al., 2002; M. A. Smith & Berger, 2010).

Procedure

We used purposive sampling, as is typical of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The first author visited undergraduate classes in counseling and communication studies, explained the purpose of the study, provided contact information, and invited female students to schedule interviews. A waiver of signed informed consent was granted by the institutional review board to protect confidentiality. Prior to the interview, interested students completed the demographic questionnaire and AUDIT online; on the basis of their AUDIT scores, they were assigned to the HR or LR focus group.

Because the social construction of the experiences and perceptions being examined is a key element in the meaning making of the women's social culture, the interviews were conducted as focus groups. Essentially, the social construction of meaning between the participants can occur during the interview process, thus allowing the researcher to observe firsthand how the participants make sense of being a female drinker in today's college culture (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). Kress and Shoffner (2007) advocated this method of collecting data for exploratory research; thus, focus groups were a prudent fit. The 90-minute focus groups were conducted by the first author in a confidential counseling clinic in an academic building on campus; they were audio- and videotaped. To protect confidentiality, we assigned each participant a pseudonym for use when completing the AUDIT and responding to interview questions and when we transcribed the interviews. Incentives of pizza, nonalcoholic drinks, and $5 in cash were provided during the focus groups.

Interview Protocol

The current study was part of a larger study that included interview questions about other drinking-related experiences. The semistructured interview began with rapport-building questions (e.g., "Describe your social life here at college") and then shifted to questions about participants' most recent drinking and typical experiences with alcohol (e.g., "Tell me about the last time you drank alcohol"). Additional questions focused on participants' experiences of drinking (e.g., "Describe how you feel about yourself when you drink").

Data Analysis

We used IPA (J. A. Smith, 1996) to analyze the focus group data in this study because it afforded the opportunity to interpret the lived experience of participants with rich detail and depth. According to J. A. Smith and Osborn (2008), the aim of IPA is to "explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (p. 53). Thus, there is a two-stage interpretive process: First, the participant makes sense of her world; second, the researcher makes sense of the participant's responses. In IPA, researchers tend to use small samples, semistructured interviews, and homogeneous samples because representativeness is futile in a small group of participants (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). The aim is not to find meaning that can be generalized to all college students, but themes and perceptions that may be transferable to groups similar in culture.

Research Team

All interviews were transcribed by the first author and then read by a team made up of the two authors and another graduate student. All three were White women, and their respective undergraduate experiences represented three different college generations.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis. First, members of the research team identified biases upfront through a bracketing exercise that was distributed to team members for cross-reference. Then, the first author kept a journal of her thoughts, feelings, and reactions following each step of the research project. During data analysis, team members read each transcript independently first and coded potential themes. Then they engaged in multiple meetings in which they shared their potential themes and supporting participant quotes and discussed these until broad themes and subthemes were reached. At the end of data coding, an external reviewer read the journal entries as well as the themes to check for researcher bias and representativeness of the themes. In addition, an external auditor found that the themes clearly were reflected in the participants' responses and language and that the research team members were not biased in their interpretations of the women's experiences and perceptions.

Results

Overall AUDIT scores ranged from 3 to 13 ($M = 7.0$, $SD = 3.43$), and an independent samples t test yielded a significant difference between the HR and LR groups, $t(7) = 3.94$, $p = .006$, with five women classified as HR drinkers ($M = 9.4$, $SD = 2.61$) and four classified as LR drinkers ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.82$). There was no significant difference between HR ($M = 19.4$, $SD = 1.14$) and LR ($M = 20$, $SD = 0.96$) group mean ages, $t(7) = -0.49$, $p = .639$. Themes and subthemes from the IPA are reported in the following sections.

Experiences and Perceptions of Drinking: HR Drinkers

Five themes emerged regarding the HR drinkers' experiences and perceptions of drinking.

Function of alcohol. Women in the HR group considered drinking as a positive experience and a necessary part of one's social life as a college student, with secondary functions described as stress relief and a fun outlet after a hard week of work. The social aspect of drinking was prominent as the women described using alcohol to meet people, loosen up, and gain social confidence. Angela summarized:

> This is how you have to be sociable and not very many people are that secure with themselves coming in at 18 years old and being like, yeah, hey, I'm this great person, get to know me, without being drunk. I feel like that crazy age and time in your life, it's absolutely necessary for many women to use alcohol just to, like, loosen some of the inhibitions. Not necessarily to get hammered, but just to feel like, ooh, I can go into this random party and just start introducing myself to people, whereas sober you'd just kinda like be there in the corner not saying anything to each other.

For the HR group, attending a party while sober was a rare occurrence, and the women said a college student needed to have a specific reason not to be drinking at a gathering, such as being

the designated driver or having a test the next day. Group members also often mentioned drinking to relieve stress. The women compartmentalized their week's tasks and responsibilities, saying weekdays were for academics but the weekends were for de-stressing. Francis explained that, at her worst, she drank a lot more heavily to escape:

> My spring semester of last year it was just, I felt like everything was going down the drain … I was smoking and drinking every weekend, um, that was the way I just kinda coped with everything. Not having it on my mind.

Alcohol use changes over time. All HR group members described drinking in college as a developmental process that changed over time. In fact, the maturation process was evident in the contrasts between amounts, frequency, and motivations of the oldest and youngest members of the group. Brianna, 18, and Grace, 19, stated respectively that when college women are younger they "drink because it's there" and "drink as much as you can because you don't know when you will get it again." The younger women did not have just one drink; instead, they drank to feel intoxicated. By contrast, the 20- and 21-year-olds said they were often too busy and too tired with jobs, internships, and classes to drink as much and they had to plan for it in their schedules. All the women agreed that drinking is a learning process, each having experimented with amounts and learning what she could handle. The younger women often tried unsuccessfully to monitor and moderate their drinking, as Brianna admitted:

> So in the morning I usually kind of just feel like, maybe I shouldn't have drank that much or I know when I drink that much I say stupid things and it's taken me several months to finally put that to use and to finally be like, maybe I shouldn't drink every weekend or maybe when I do drink, I shouldn't drink vodka.

The HR group discussed the phenomenon of turning 21 and alcohol losing its appeal or thrill. This age marked the point when drinking decreased and the women monitored their own amounts and frequencies more closely.

Shared culture of bad experiences. For the HR group, telling stories of a bad drinking night built camaraderie and served as common ground on which otherwise strangers felt connected to one another. They were quick to validate each other's experiences and say they had each "been there." For example, Grace shared her most recent drinking experience in which she drank Four Loko, a popular alcoholic drink that contained caffeine and had been banned from several campuses. Other group members collectively indicated compassion and understanding and winced in anticipation of how her evening turned out. Each shared negative consequences, such as blacking out, having a hangover, missing work, getting into fights and arguments, drunk texting friends and family, and being overly emotional, yet alternately they tried to console each other. One particular rallying point was the concept of "that girl," defined as the one person at the party who was out of control, stumbled around, embarrassed herself, and had to be eventually removed from the scene. They judged and watched "that girl," but then each admitted to being "that girl" at least once in her college drinking career. What initially seemed like regret for making a negative impression or potentially ruining an image evolved into a sort of rite of passage and pride about having been "that girl."

Safety considerations. The HR women agreed, in a matter-of-fact manner, that to avoid severe consequences a woman must always be aware of safety considerations when drinking. They named the universal rules of basic alcohol education and health promotion they had accumulated over the years. Included in these guidelines were, first and foremost, never taking a drink from someone they did not know due to the danger of being drugged or "roofied." Brianna shared,

> I went to a party … I kinda stopped drinking because I realized I didn't know that many people there. And what kinda made me stop that was that I found a roofie in my drink from a guy that I had just met, you know, just talking and um, kinda hanging out…. But I took it and went to the bathroom and poured it out and there was, um, a pill in there. So that really opened my eyes.

The women were adamant that there was a difference between drinking around people you did not know and drinking in the appropriate context in which a college woman allowed herself to get drunk. In the former situation, a woman needed to always be aware of her surroundings, go out with friends, and have her antenna up for potential danger. But in a smaller, more familiar context in which she knew the people, she felt safer drinking more heavily. The women conveyed that when guys drink, they push limits and become dangerous, so women need to beware. The nonchalant approach of the participants to this inherent danger marked a sort of resignation to accepting the reality of men who prey on intoxicated and impaired women. These women were guarded when they needed to be and tended to let loose when they perceived the setting to be more intimate and familiar and, therefore, safer.

Role of attention. Finally, women in the HR group discussed the role that attention played when they were drinking. Attention was described as the acknowledgment that they were being watched—by men, women, peers, or strangers out in public at bars and clubs. Sometimes the women conveyed that they liked the attention they were receiving. It was nice to be noticed when they dressed up and went out. However, at other times, being seen as drunk and out of control was embarrassing and caused the women to feel regret about how they were being viewed. The women were aware of getting positive attention, especially when they were drinking around men, but the attention could quickly evolve into unwanted advances, including groping. They shared both positive and negative experiences associated with drinking and felt conflicted, if only briefly, as Grace summed up, "We're never going to do that again, but we do anyway." Angela's description vacillated between the desire to keep up the image of being a classy woman and liking the attention:

> I am very conscious of how much I drink because I don't want to lose that, like, class factor … so, in my mind's eye a woman is, you know, put together, classy, fabulous, this, that, and the other, so and when she has too much alcohol in her system she loses all of that.

Experiences and Perceptions of Drinking: LR Drinkers

Four themes emerged regarding the LR drinkers' experiences and perceptions of drinking.

Importance of being in control. From the moment alcohol was mentioned, the LR women made it clear that they were not beholden to drinking as a habit or expectation. The word *control* was associated with alcohol multiple times, with Jane summarizing, "I think the biggest part of drinking is control … know your limits and try not to go overboard and end up in a dangerous situation." These women depicted a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, stating that they could easily choose not to drink or to have only one drink in a social setting. They considered factors such as how much they had eaten, who was around them, the cost of alcohol, and knowing when there was something at stake, like an important test the next day. For example, Donna said she would not drink if she was the designated driver, and Jane described disliking being unaware of her surroundings, saying, "Once I feel a buzz, I'll stop." Lastly, the women were self-conscious of how they were being perceived and did not want to leave a bad impression. Holly shared,

> I'm really conscious when I go into a public place … if I order a drink, I make sure just to keep it to one. Just so that if one of my professors are there or graduate students are there, that they don't get the wrong impression…. I don't really go drinking with anybody who has that kind of, um, authority, or something…. It's tricky.

The LR drinkers also depicted the ability to learn vicariously through others' bad drinking experiences. Although they did experiment and occasionally overdo it with alcohol, they typically did not have to learn firsthand with excessive drinking. Because these women were intentional and discriminating with their drinking choices, they rarely experienced consequences from their drinking. It was more important to them to exercise control and moderation than to engage in risky behaviors.

Drinking has a social component. The LR drinkers stated that drinking could be fun without getting drunk. They described drinking as part of the social bonding of college and the time in one's life to enjoy it. Holly said,

> It's like, it really is, drinking is a part of the college experience, you know. You're away from home, you can do whatever you want, it's all around you, you know? To not drink is kinda like the odd man out. We all come in as freshmen with this idea of what our freedom is gonna be … if you don't drink it's not as fun. Like, you don't have as many memories as you would cause … trying to be sober with a bunch of drunk people is not always fun.

Peer influence was a reason to drink, when others were drinking or someone brought alcohol to a party. Drinking was also described as a rite of passage. For example, Jane emphasized that trying alcohol was something she had to do, even though she was terrified of the outcome and of getting sick. For these women, telling bad drinking stories was embarrassing and they were quick to say they learned from their mistakes, careful not to repeat them. There was no merit in sharing war stories or being out of control as they described experiences such as "drunk dialing" mom, being seen as foolish, and feeling ill at work the next day.

Finally, women in the LR group emphasized the context in which they chose to drink. They preferred to drink in small groups of familiar people or on girls' nights and were most comfortable drinking with friends. Donna stated that clubs could be exciting, flattering, and

"random fun" if done on her own terms with a group of street-savvy women, using words like "strength," "confidence," and "power" to describe how it made her feel, whereas Holly said the discomfort of being leered at by men was remedied by going out with a group of men who offered protection.

Watching others drink for entertainment. The LR women stated that part of their fun was watching others drink. The women thought it was funny to follow the antics of the chosen "drunk chick," who was behaving outrageously in a public place. Indeed, this became the focus among their friends for the evening. As the level of consumption rose, drinking was referred to by group members as "crazy" and "foolish," and the tone of judgment increased. The drinkers they usually watched for entertainment were women. Men somehow were expected to behave badly, perpetuating a "boys will be boys" attitude, whereas drunk college women made spectacles out of themselves. Holly described an incident of the "drunk chick":

> We went to a club, there was this one drunk girl. And she was the entertainment for the night 'cause she tried to jump over the banister instead of taking the stairs … then she would walk up to these random guys and start dancing for about 5 seconds, and then she would just fall on the floor and just lay there. And whoever she was just dancing with would just walk away—they didn't even help her up. And then she would lay on the floor for a little bit and then get up and go dance with someone else.

However, these women's amusement was mitigated by a derision stemming from unmet expectations of women. Both Jane and Holly stated that they expected women "to carry ourselves in a certain way" and disliked unattractive behavior. They agreed that no one wanted to be the object of such scrutiny, that women should be held accountable for their actions even when intoxicated, and that alcohol should not be used as a scapegoat for their actions.

Coping skills. The LR drinkers talked about healthier ways of coping with stress rather than drinking, such as exercising, playing guitar, playing board games with friends, and writing poetry and songs. One woman described calling her mother when she was feeling stressed out, and another talked about venting to friends. The oldest group member did admit to occasionally relieving stress as a freshman by drinking after a bad week, signaling a developmental pattern to drinking, but reported she had not done that in years.

Discussion

The interviews with HR and LR female college drinkers yielded accounts of drinking experiences and perceptions with both commonalities and significant variations. Although some experiences were shared by all the women, distinct differences based on drinking risk level emerged that informed and influenced the women's drinking choices, indicating new directions for interventions and further explorations of college women's drinking.

Thematic Similarities About Drinking

Common themes surfaced between HR and LR participants regarding how they experienced drinking within the college context. First, it is widely known that alcohol education has been implemented earlier, more extensively, and consistently with this generation of college students

than previous generations (NIAAA, 2002; Wechsler et al., 2002), and the general knowledge of these women bore that out. Both groups knew basic alcohol education concerning what affects blood alcohol concentration, like height and weight; they also knew to eat before drinking, get plenty of sleep, and avoid mixing different types of alcohol. They used protective strategies, like avoid taking shots, sip drinks slowly, and drink water along with alcohol, mirroring conclusions from Benton et al. (2004). They also recited a universal set of safety guidelines that all of the women followed to avoid negative consequences, such as staying with one's group, not going out alone, not accepting a drink from a "random guy," and being on guard in public places. The fact that the women could readily cite these alcohol education facts but continued to experience consequences lends further support to the NIAAA's (2002, 2007) report that education alone is a necessary but not sufficient intervention and must be supplemented by more comprehensive substance abuse interventions on college campuses.

Next, the women agreed that drinking in college was an inevitable part of the college experience, used to lower inhibitions around meeting people because they did not feel comfortable or secure approaching people sober. In addition, HR and LR women similarly described drinking as a developmental and maturational process that changed over time as one aged and acquired more responsibilities; drinking decreased after they turned 21 and lost its "taboo" appeal.

Third, both HR and LR drinkers addressed drinking in the gender-specific context of being a college woman. All of the women voiced their preference to drink in safe small groups of familiar people, in part due to the added vulnerability and danger of being a woman in the college drinking culture. Furthermore, when the women drank in gatherings with men, the men encouraged them to drink more than they usually did, take shots, and drink more rapidly. These HR behaviors matched previous findings in which sorority-affiliated women participated in drinking to get drunk (M. A. Smith & Berger, 2010; Young et al., 2005). Regardless of risk level, the participants described mixed messages they received about drinking that created tension, such as being the cool girl who can keep up with the guys versus avoiding being "that girl" and staying in control. They felt pressured to participate in drinking games but were aware that a line could not be crossed or the woman's image would be tainted.

Lastly, the women in this study voiced an awareness that, as college women, they were being watched, scrutinized, judged, and, stereotypically, expected to act badly and fulfill some sort of cultural role of bad girl. They faced this constant and inevitable inspection from men, their peers, each other, and society as a whole. Possibly due to this intense scrutiny and exacerbated by the contradicting expectations for college women, all participants mentioned stress as part of being a college woman and, ironically, drinking was culturally viewed as a temporary escape.

Thematic Contrasts About Drinking

There also were numerous differences between perceptions and experiences of drinking by HR and LR drinkers. The HR drinkers felt like they would be missing out if they did not drink, whereas the LR drinkers voiced a take-it-or-leave-it attitude with alcohol. HR drinkers described constantly attempting to control or monitor their drinking but achieving little success, especially earlier in college, even when they had recently experienced a negative consequence and vowed

they would not repeat their drinking behavior. This cycle was noted in M. A. Smith and Berger's (2010) Relational Ritual Reinforcement Model of drinking. By contrast, LR drinkers displayed more sensible choices, actually controlled their drinking, and were much more intentional with their choices and plans. The HR drinkers seemed more susceptible to peers' influence to drink more than they had originally planned and succumb to riskier behaviors, whereas the LR drinkers tended to outsmart those around them who pushed them to take shots of alcohol. The LR women even shared tips for pretending to drink to ward off negative influences.

Finally, HR and LR drinkers differed in how they experienced instances of excessive drinking among women. For the HR group, telling drinking stories built camaraderie and helped the women relate to one another. They laughed when sharing mistakes and reassured each other that they had all "been there"; this finding is similar to several previous qualitative researchers' findings of storytelling and bonding as a function of young women's drinking (MacNeela & Bredin, 2010; M. A. Smith & Berger, 2010). For the LR drinkers, a night of drinking to excess was an event met with shame, told with lowered voices and pained expressions. Indeed, getting drunk for the LR women was described as "uncomfortable," "scary," and "foolish." Developing that concept a step further, the HR drinkers admitted to having been out of control, earning the widely known label of "that girl" and, although they feigned remorse, treated becoming "that girl" like a predictable and acceptable notch in a college woman's belt. The LR drinkers treated "that girl" as a form of entertainment when they went out and were alternately amused and dismayed that a woman would allow herself to lose control and thus mar her reputation.

Implications for College Counselors

Because of the change in trends in women's drinking, how to accurately assess risk and provide services for women who may present with problem drinking is a critical professional development issue on college campuses. Although counselors tend to focus on individual interventions, they must be aware that college women are living in a drinking culture steeped in mixed messages, and individual choices may be an indicator of broader social norms. Therefore, using small-group interventions may be an avenue to address reconciling safety considerations with the need to belong. Implementing a sex-specific group intervention with college women who have received an alcohol citation using motivational interviewing has shown promise in reducing drinking rates and consequences (LaBrie, Thompson, Huchting, Lac, & Buckley, 2007), especially with women who are in higher risk drinking categories. A three- to five-session small-group counseling could begin by collecting individual drinking data, beliefs, and motives and providing individual sex-specific norms based on perceptions of proximal peers; Lewis and Neighbors (2004) found this to be an effective method in producing behavior change. Then, infusing discussion components that address pressures and motives to drink would allow the women to share experiences and influences in a supportive environment. The group leader could facilitate discussion of experiences of sexual violence and assumptions of sexual availability to acknowledge the underlying stress women face in drinking situations. Lastly, after focusing on developing assertiveness and coping skills, the women could be encouraged to create sex-specific social norm messages relevant to their respective campus and become advocates.

College counselors have an opportunity to advocate for change on a systemic level, through alcohol and sexual assault policies, and as an obligation to understand the development of college students in light of mixed messages that have been pervasive and permissive of HR drinking. Programming and counseling with college men may help address the larger drinking culture being promoted at a university. College counselors providing substance abuse outreach for women would be wise to tailor their efforts for specific small groups on campus, such as residence halls or learning communities. One can no longer point only to the affiliated shared culture of sororities and fraternities in regard to HR drinking and not to the campus-wide shared culture or, on an even broader scale, the college student culture.

One notable dynamic present during the interviews that could be useful for college counselors was a general social anxiety about how to meet people and belong on a college campus. As a result, the college women believed that they could not meet people and socialize without the presence of alcohol, supporting Norberg, Norton, Olivier, and Zvolensky's (2010) conclusion that social anxiety is a risk factor for drinking among college women. In our study, the women described instances in which, in the context of the college social environment, the mere presence of alcohol, regardless of consumption, gave people permission to approach one another and initiate conversation, which would be unthinkable if they were sober. Interpersonal skills and coping with social anxiety could be assessed and taught in relation to drinking choices.

Limitations

Because of the small sample size, conclusions may be transferable only to individuals with similar demographics and context. The culture of this particular university also differed from the other sites in previous qualitative literature. Located in a midsized city in a southern state, some factors that have been associated with HR drinking, such as prominent athletic teams and high rates of Greek life involvement, were not present, potentially affecting the drinking culture. Although great care was made to avoid recruiting participants from the same teams, organizations, or other groups with shared norms, we acknowledge that peer approval is a strong need in this developmental age group, and the use of focus groups may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose, discouraging them from sharing experiences of drinking that could be perceived as being outside the norm.

Future Research

There are numerous directions for future study to more clearly illuminate the experiences of women on college campuses with regard to drinking. Relevant areas include how women's drinking may be influenced by gender identity, how the merging of sexuality and drinking affects women's perceptions of themselves, and how media portrayals of women influence college women's perceptions of drinking. The sheer prominence and pervasiveness of media exposure to college women about drinking have the capacity to shape belief and behaviors (Lederman, Lederman, & Kully 2004). College counselors must understand the depth of meaning behind women's drinking before they can apply specific interventions that have the likelihood of success on a particular campus.

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