Sorority Women, Drinking, and Context: The Influence of Environment on College Student Drinking

Jill Russett Ph.D.
Christopher Newport University, Jill.Russett@cnu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/oracle

Part of the Higher Education Commons

SORORITY WOMEN, DRINKING, AND CONTEXT:
THE INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENT ON COLLEGE STUDENT DRINKING

JILL RUSSETT, CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY

The purpose of this study was to explore college drinking from the perspective of sorority women, including delving further into situational or contextual conditions related to the environment where drinking occurs, and examining the extent to which gender influences associated behaviors and choices related to drinking. Data collection occurred through three focus groups; in all 25 undergraduate sorority women participated. In addition, six focus group participants volunteered to take part in individual follow up interviews. Findings illustrate the prevalence and influence of a male dominated drinking environment, specifically identified within fraternities, and highlight sorority women's awareness of gender differences and subsequent choices. Implications for college administrators and health educators responsible for campus programming and prevention efforts are provided.

Over time perceptions of women's use of alcohol have varied with notions such as "real ladies don't drink" to "real women drink beer." Nevertheless, like other behaviors once attributed to men, it has become more socially acceptable for women to engage in consuming alcohol, and in particular, drinking in larger quantities (Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, & D'Arcy, 2005). Nowhere is this more prevalent than on college campuses. Over the years evidence has shown women's drinking levels have increasingly reached rates similar to men, and college women who drink continue to exceed the recommended limits on weekly alcohol consumption (Wechsler, et al., 2002; White & Hingson, 2014; Young, et al., 2005). White and Hingson (2014) posit rates of higher drinking levels among women are ingrained in the youth drinking culture. Significant emphasis has been placed on quantitative studies as a primary investigative tool for understanding college student drinking. These efforts has resulted in identifying a number of patterns related to high risk or binge drinking among college age women, and more specifically among sorority women related to quantity and frequency of use and associated behaviors. However such measurement studies have only provided part of the picture, neglecting the subjective experiences of participants and their understanding of

high risk drinking and meaning behind this behavior. Similarly, drinking patterns among Greek letter organization has received much attention as a whole but fewer studies related to descriptive data about the setting or environment exist (Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 2009). The present study focuses on sorority women and aims to understand how the context, specifically venues where women engage in drinking, influence behaviors and choices associated with drinking.

Review of the Literature

Drinking on college campuses has long been recognized as a public health issue. Findings from national data sources, including the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (CAS), the Core Institute (CORE), and Monitoring the Future (MTF), are in general agreement that two of five U.S. college students engage in heavy episodic drinking (also known as binge drinking, defined as five or more drinks for men and four or more drinks for women on a single occasion within the past two weeks) and that consumption is generally heavier for men than women (White & Hingson, 2014). The phenomenon is certainly not new and when considering established patterns of college student drinking specific to women, data from the CAS survey

from 1993, 1997, 1999, and 2001 (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008), suggests each year rates of women's drinking over time are converging with that of men's (Keyes, Grant, & Hasin, 2008). Data from the 2001 CAS supports findings of increased drinking by college women. During this time, frequent binge drinking (defined as binge drinking three or more times in the past two weeks) increased 17.1% to 20.9% as did drinking with the intention of getting drunk from 12.3% to 16.8% while abstinence, or rates for women who never or rarely drank alcohol, decreased 26% to 21% (Wechsler et al., 2002). More recent data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (SAMHSA, 2013) show similar rates of alcohol use in the past month for women (58.2%) as men (60.8%) and data from the 2011 MTF indicated 68 percent of men and women have both reported having been drunk at some point (White & Hingson, 2014). Clearly this is an issue college administrators have been addressing for some time.

Serious consequences exist for all college students who engage in heavy episodic (binge) drinking including blackouts, violence, physical injuries, and alcohol related traffic accidents (Wechsler, et al., 2002; Wilsnack, Wilsnack, & Kantor, 2013). In many ways, these consequences are compounded for women who, due to biological differences, experience the onset of intoxication occur more rapidly than men. In this regard, the harmful consequences associated with drinking behaviors remains especially notable for women. For instance, women's ability to process alcohol contributes to the vulnerability of health related effects including faster onset of liver disease, greater risk of heart problems, accelerated brain atrophy, and increased risk of reproductive disorders (Wilsnack, et al., 2013). Additionally, because alcohol abuse and misuse often occurs in social settings, the chance of risky sexual behaviors and sexual assault increase with higher rates of alcohol use (Kaya, Iwamoto, Grivel, Clinton, & Brady, 2016). Given the rates of young women's drinking patterns are converging

with that of men, as well as the distinct health consequences associated with high risk drinking for women, the continued need to address risk and protective factors related to women's drinking patterns is imperative.

Finally, as sorority women are the focus of this study, it is important to understand the drinking norms specific to this group as established in the literature. Multiple studies consistently find members of sororities drink more often and in greater quantities than their non-affiliated counterparts (Caudill et al., 2006; Sher, Bartholow, & Nanda, 2001; Wechsler et al., 2002; Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 2009). According to the 2001 College Alcohol Survey 62.4% of sorority members engaged in binge drinking compared to 40.9% of other female students, and 75.4% of students living in a sorority house were considered heavy drinkers, compared to 45.3% who lived in other student housing (Wechsler, et al., 2002). Furthermore, researchers Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport (2001), contend women affiliated with Greek letter organizations are at greatest risk to begin binge drinking and experiences negative consequences soon after arriving in college as they have been found to be least experienced in consuming large quantities of alcohol prior to coming to college. Ironically, while much is known about drinking patterns among sorority women, less is known about the relationship between alcohol use and the environment specific to Greek letter organizations. While fraternity houses aren't the only location where undergraduate drinking occurs, they are one of the primary settings where members of Greek letter organizations socialize; therefore it would be reasonable to consider this venue further.

Drinking Context: Fraternity / Sorority Parties

It is important to understand the context of where alcohol is consumed, specifically with regard to the Greek letter organizations. Students living in both sorority and fraternity houses are

more likely to support "partying and drinking" as important activities, with about two-thirds (69%) of the fraternity-associated men and almost half (45%) of the sorority-associated women indicating partying is important (Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 2001, pg. 401). Research indicates individuals vary their drinking behaviors by location and identify some drinking contexts as higher risk (Lewis, et al., 2011). A closer look at parties supported by Greek letter organizations show this environment is associated with the greatest frequency of high risk drinking (Park, Sher, & Krull, 2009; Turrisi, Mallett, Mastroleo, & Larimer, 2006) and students attending these events have been found to have higher blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels (Glindemann & Geller, 2003). Additionally, with the exception of off-campus parties, students consume larger quantities of alcohol at fraternity/ sorority parties than any other context (Paschall & Saltz, 2007).

Literature related directly to understanding the physical environment associated with fraternity houses is sparse and inconsistent, yet what is known seems to present unique challenges for women. For example, Bleeker and Murnen (2005) found men living in fraternity houses were more likely to display objectifying images of women in their rooms and hold beliefs supporting women's desire to engage in rough sexual acts. Likewise in a significantly older study, Rhoads (1995) concluded parties held in fraternity houses portray a patriarchal system in which men are elevated to a higher status and privilege based on higher levels of alcohol consumption. He further determined fraternities have the potential to marginalize women by determining conditional circumstances (how a woman is dressed, or the way they look) in which women are included or excluded in their social functions. In another study by Martin & Hummer (1989), women were described as "bait" for recruiting new members in which the fraternity openly promotes attractive women as part of their brotherhood. More recently, Wechsler,

Kuh, & Davenport (2001) found 69% of sorority members considered sexual assault to be a problem compared to 39% of fraternity members. This notion is reinforced in findings by Bannon, Brosi, and Foubert (2013) that show sorority women are more likely to be survivors of sexual assault and fraternity men are more likely to be perpetrators compared to other students. Finally, fraternity houses meet the criteria for defining a sexually objectifying environment with evidence of engrained traditional gender roles, disproportionate ratio of men to women, and pervasive lack of power experienced by women (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011).

Such evidence suggests parties held at fraternity houses may contribute to an environment which promotes the disenfranchisement for women. Though some evidence in the literature supports the context of fraternity houses as having the potential to marginalize women, it would be unfair to paint all fraternity houses in this light. For example, Boswell and Spade (1996) found women identify fraternity houses as a safe zone and a source of support where "a woman could go and get drunk if she wanted to and feel secure that the fraternity men would not take advantage of her" (p. 134). Likewise not all sorority women drink, nor do they all fraternize this setting, and sorority women may choose other venues in which to drink. What is evident is the gap in the literature describing this environment.

Gaining further knowledge about the environmental influences faced by undergraduate sorority women will help researchers identify factors that promote high risk drinking and identify potential intervention strategies to reduce potential harm. As noted earlier, most of the data generating social and cultural influences of college drinking patterns have emerged from quantitative studies, whereas there is a need for greater qualitative research to help uncover further nuances of this phenomenon. Specifically, further research is needed on the drinking context and more specifically in relation to male centered environments (including fraternity houses) where

sorority women may engage in high risk drinking. Likewise, given what is known about this context, an unintentional, and perhaps little recognized consequence, is the potential for women to feel exploited and devalued in this setting. It is with these questions in mind the study at hand was developed.

This study explores sorority member's perceptions of high risk drinking behaviors and the context where this occurs. Using a qualitative approach provides a voice for women to share their experiences and offer new perspectives to support the unique needs of women. The current study aims to add to the literature on drinking context and social norms by exploring sorority women's perceptions, behaviors, and choices related to drinking in the natural environment where it occurs.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

The study took place in a moderate sized (6,299 undergraduate students), predominately Caucasian, university with women accounting for 54% of the undergraduate enrollment and 27% were sorority members. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with sorority members (aged 18-22) to explore their understanding of the drinking environment. To obtain information-rich samples, focus group participants were identified and selected using purposeful sampling consisting of undergraduate women who were (a) full time (b) second, third, and fourth year students and (c) members of a sorority. Participants were recruited through personal invitation, flyers, email correspondence, council meetings, and professional campus connections. The researcher contacted the first three sororities who expressed an interest in participation. Written consent was obtained from each participant and individuals who participated in follow up interviews received a twenty dollar gift certificate. The institutional review board of the researcher's university found the project to comply with appropriate ethical standards.

Focus group and individual interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Overall twenty-five women (ages 19-22) from three distinct sorority chapters participated in the study including 6 second-year, 10 third-year, and 9 fourth year students. As first year students had not yet become members of sororities at the time of the study, they were excluded. Many women spoke of being active on campus within their sorority or through involvement in extracurricular activities; all but two students identified as Caucasian. Members were familiar with one another and with venues where drinking occurs, therefore having shared insight into similar experiences and behaviors. All participants reported engaging in high risk drinking at some point in their time at college and were forthcoming in their description and perception of their experiences.

Six follow up in-depth face-to-face individual interviews occurred within one to two weeks following the focus group, providing a second method of data generation. Individual participants were selected based on criterion sampling, meeting the following: (a) had expressed personally engaging in recent binge drinking behaviors during the focus group (b) identified as living or had lived in the sorority house, and (c) equally represented second year, third year, and fourth year students. The time between the focus group discussion and personal interview provided an opportunity for the women to reflect on their construction of drinking behaviors and insight into patterns shared earlier. Interviews occurred in settings of the participants' choice.

Focus Groups and Interviews

A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit information about women's experiences and to allow for additional comments and discussion by participants. This approach supports the intent of naturalistic inquiry while providing comparable data across subjects through the use of standardized questions (Cantrell, 1993). Research questions related to high risk drinking

and the context in which it occurred provided an overarching guide to frame the study, with prompts addressing experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Some questions included: What is the drinking culture like on campus? How is high risk drinking defined? Where does drinking occur? What are some positive/negative aspects of drinking and where it occurs? and How is drinking perceived by men/women? Follow up individual interviews asked women to reflect further on these questions and provide specific examples of experiences that shaped their view on drinking.

Data Analysis

The author sought to explore the effects of the environment on women's drinking behaviors and perceptions of this experience. An interpretivist paradigm allowed for meaning and constructions of women's experiences of drinking, gender, and context to emerge. This perspective emphasizes how meaning is constructed experientially and socially (Jansen & Davis, 1998), and is a particularly relevant viewpoint in the college setting where social context influences drinking behaviors.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim; to maintain confidentiality all participants were given pseudonyms and informed no identifying information would occur in research outputs. For analysis of transcripts, the researcher used a constant comparative method as a framework for coding, reduction of data, and final written discussion on the development of themes. This approach is useful for generating a small number of findings and to support complex connections from information generated (Priest, Roberts, & Woods, 2002). This process helps to identify similarities and differences in the data and provides a means of linking data to conceptual issues (Rossman & Rallis, 2010). Further reduction occurred until data saturation (no new insights) became evident (Creswell, 2014). A secondary form of data analysis used holistic coding to understand field notes, personal reflections, and observation (Creswell, 2014). Combining holistic data with categorical data enriched the interpretation of the study. The resulting parsimony of ideas and clarity of themes are presented using thick rich descriptions in a narrative form allowing the voices of participants to be heard both collectively and individually.

Trust in the researcher was demonstrated by participant's willingness to engage in open discussion about experiences not always viewed as socially acceptable, especially with two thirds of the participants being underage. Additionally, researcher bias including ideas and personal experiences can influence the interpretation of outcomes. This study is grounded in strategies recommended by Creswell (2014) to strengthen the trustworthiness and authenticity of results including (a) triangulation of data through the use of multiple sources, (b) member checking to ensure accuracy of themes, (c) clarifying researcher bias through ongoing journaling of personal values, opinions, and biases and (d) through peer consultation to discuss methodology. The overarching perspective of interpretive phenomenology acknowledges multiple perspectives exist and therefore it is noted that results are not representative of the student population as a whole. As the findings are presented in the women's own voices, readers can make logical connections between this study and other similar settings.

Limitations

Several factors could have impacted the results of this study. Findings illustrate a select group of women's constructions of their experiences are bound within context, place, and time. Specifically, affiliation with Greek letter organizations includes a social environment with unique organizational norms and structure that influences behavior. For example, it was assumed membership in a sorority led participant's to abide

by their chapters rules and internal governance. Likewise, participants may have felt either pressure to conform to group norms or maintained a sense of safety in sharing their personal views in a supportive environment where they may not feel judged by their sisters. Also, one's drinking patterns are influenced by time (spring semester), scheduling (holidays, course examinations), and campus specific events (sports, formal dances, etc.).

It should be noted due to the nature of the study, findings cannot (and should not) be generalized to other settings. Likewise, personal values, experiences, and realities of both the researcher and participants cannot be separated from the information generated and therefore may influence the results (Creswell, 2014). Recognizing this possibility, the practice of self-reflection by the researcher was necessary, requiring careful consideration of personal beliefs and values as a woman and a researcher, former engagement in Greek life and membership in a sorority, motives driving research, and how personal past history may influence the interpretation of the women's voices and stories heard through data collection. In an effort to minimize bias, the author engaged in transparency through discussion with other researchers, peer debriefing, and reflexive journals, all appropriate methods intended to reduce and clarify researcher bias (Creswell, 2014).

Results

In analyzing the data collected through focus groups and individual interviews, three themes were identified as follows: (1) the perception of the culture and drinking behaviors unique to the campus environment and men and women, (2) the environment in which drinking occurs is predominately male oriented, influencing women's behaviors and choices, and (3) identified risks by participants who conformed to the unspoken norms established in this context. Embedded in these themes women articulated awareness of the inequalities within the environment and ex-

pressed some insight into the subsequent choices they made in order to participate in the drinking culture. Women were also cognizant of potential consequences, particularly as they reflected on their past experiences or as they understood this to be true for younger women.

Theme One: Setting the Stage: Campus Drinking Culture

To begin, it is important to understand the drinking culture described by the women in this study. Participants readily identified drinking alcohol as a regular and significant part of their undergraduate experience:

> it's like the weekend activity, as in like a lot of people will ask "what are you doing this weekend" and you'll say "going out;" and "going out" is synonymous with getting drunk, and so it's kind of like how you define what you do with your time

Rationale for engaging in drinking were fairly typical for this population, mostly revolving around drinking as a social activity with some expressing the lack of alternatives, going so far as to say "*if we didn't' drink, what would we do on the weekends?*" At the same time, women possessed insight into other groups of students who chose not to drink indicating: "*there is a sizeable population who really don't drink at all, or who drink very little.*" Although drinking was described as appealing to a specific segment of the student body, those students that didn't drink were described negatively as being "*holed up in the library*" and as being "*overly concerned with their academics.*"

Women were open in sharing their personal drinking behaviors and shared perceptions of alcohol use in relation to gender. For example, women believed men experience more pressure and drank more frequently ("*if a guy turns down a drink, he is told to "man up" and drink something*") and in greater quantities ("*men who could handle a lot of drinks are held in high regard*"); expressed that men were more likely to drink beer; and believed men engaged more often in competitive drinking. On the other hand, women were de-

6

scribed as preferring hard liquor, mixed drinks, or wine and identified drinking as a vehicle to socialize. The perception of both men and women was drinking is the glue tying together social activities and weekends of "*going out*" becoming synonymous with "*getting drunk*." Many women disclosed consuming high levels of alcohol or associated with others who did so and found such behaviors as acceptable, particularly if it wasn't a regular occurrence. This level of acceptance was expressed in the following statement "*there is a sense of being in college, I don't have a care here, so if I'm going to binge drink, this is the best time to do it*."

Drinking behaviors tended to shift over the time of the college experience. Women who entered college as non-drinkers found themselves drinking more frequently later in their college experience. Earlier drinking experiences (first/second year) were described as sporadic and associated with reckless behaviors while older students (third/fourth year) suggest safer and more regular drinking patterns. Participants reflected on behaviors of first year women as "*roaming the campus, stopping at various social events, and meeting strangers*." Beginning second year and subsequent years after, women described their drinking patterns as more established, occurring within smaller groups of friends. An example of this transition in drinking patterns follows:

> Freshman and sophomore year are spent largely pre-gaming in someone's room and going to the fraternities or going to an off campus party whether it be a sport's house or what not. Junior and senior year, … [is] more casual get-togethers with friends and either doing that for the duration of the night, or maybe going to an off campus party and very rarely going to one of the fraternities. … senior year there won't be pre-gaming and you'll just go straight to the bars.

Women perceived men as drinking significantly more and having more pressure to do so; for instance it was heard "*plenty of the girls choose not to drink and still have a good time,*" however men were unlikely to decline a drink "*in fact, I rarely find a guy that is not drinking*" said one participant. Drinking was described as a "*non-issue*" for women in the presence of other women, but in mixed company they experienced increased pressure to drink. If women chose to abstain for the evening, participants said they were frequently asked by men to drink anyway. Some rationalized men's behavior as "*being good hosts*" while others said men didn't want to "*drink alone*." These examples illustrate the participant's general acceptance of alcohol use and perception of gender differences, setting the stage for understanding the influence of context on women's behaviors and choices.

Theme Two: Drinking in a Male Dominated Environment

Participants expressed if they chose to drink, especially if they were under 21, they often did so in a predominately male dominated environment. Though some participants identified private houses located off campus (occupied by men), the majority indicated drinking most often occurred at fraternity houses within Greek letter organizations. In part this is due to rules prohibiting sorority members from drinking or hosting parties involving alcohol in their residence. The National Panhellenic Conference, the umbrella organization supporting sororities, has established guidelines prohibiting women from hosting alcohol related events or possessing alcohol within sorority houses. In contrast, no such national standard exists for fraternities. One woman said:

> we follow the campus rules and our international rules. So campus rules say that if you are over 21 you can have alcohol in your room and drink alcohol in your room… our international rules for our sorority say that we are supposed to be dry permanently as one of our ideals that we uphold.

The differentiation of drinking policy's among sororities and fraternities creates a fundamental discrepancy where drinking is permitted. The international rule prohibiting sorority members

from drinking in their own house, as compared to fraternities who have more permissive rules related to alcohol on the premise, not only set different standards for drinking but perhaps implies it is fundamentally wrong for women to engage in this behavior.

> if you are underage or a freshman, a lot of [women] go to the frats just to drink because they know they are going to get it, so it puts the power into the fraternities if you want to think about it that way.

The drinking environment is highly influenced by Greek letter organizations in other ways as well. Throughout the academic year events such as recruitment, homecoming, formals, and other social events involve the participation of both sororities and fraternities, often requiring its membership to take part in the event. For example,

> I notice in our sorority, the day before bid day, every semester we have pref night [referring to a step in the recruitment process] and all of the girls in all of the sororities dress up and go around to all of the frats, and all of the frats have alcohol, and it's the one time our entire sorority, like all 90 girls are together and it's really just a bonding thing, like people you have never talked to before, but your drunk and you're like, look at all of these things we have in common

Consistent with this environment was the notion fraternity houses resembled a "*local bar*" with large open rooms to accommodate dance parties. They were described as dirty and smelling of stale beer with concrete floors or beer soaked carpets and having well-worn and stained furniture. The participants shared stories of having to use a dirty bathroom that was "*not suitable for a woman*" and not wanting to drink tap water from the sink.

Theme Three: Influence and Risks Associated with Drinking in a Man's World

With drinking venues predominately controlled by men, if women choose to drink, they have to conform to male standards. Women spoke of adapting behaviors in a number of ways to assimilate to the drinking environment. For example, they altered their dress, changed drinking patterns, and conformed to more traditional gender roles. The following exemplifies this behavior;

> It tends to make the girls dress [in a more provocative manner] because they are going to get more alcohol, like if I showed up in a sweatshirt, a guy's not going to be like 'here is a shot' so you wear as minimal clothing as you can, and the power is all in their hands, like, oh you're not pretty…so I'm not going to give you alcohol because that is just a waste of my time

Women articulated this as being "*sexist*" yet willingly participated. Likewise, women acknowledged being described as "*objects at parties for men to control through the alcohol*" with this being particularly true for the experiences of first year women who were sometimes seen as being ridiculed and exploited by men at parties.

Influence of gender was further evidenced by men controlling admission to parties and access to alcohol. Women indicated you had to "*know someone*" to enter a party, and once there, alcohol was often obtained "*behind closed doors in a guy's room.*" Drinks were made specifically for women, described as "*girly drinks*" in large tubs making it difficult to track consumption and "*definitely more dangerous because you don't know what is in that cup.*" At the end of the evening, women are faced with the decision to leave, sometimes alone, or to remain after hours. The women agreed this choice was often made for them as described in the following typical example of what occurs near the end of a fraternity party:

> at 1:45 they cut all the lights on and say if you are not [with] frat X or you are not dating one then get out. And this is said over a loud speaker.

Some parties possessed sexually explicit themes requiring women to dress provocatively and role play positions of lesser power. An example of this type of party was described as "*Golf

8

Pro's and Tennis Ho's" (professional male athletes and female escorts) or "*Sec's and Exec's*" (where women are scantily dressed secretaries and men are well-dressed executives), both exemplifying power differentials. These parties were described as intentionally appealing to first year sorority women whereas upper class women purposefully found alternate venues, particularly when they turned 21. However, men were described as continuing to engage in these parties and intentionally trying to connect with younger women.

Other patriarchal patterns and stereotypical gender roles emerged. Women described themselves as "*nurturers and caretakers*" while men were portrayed as "*dominant, experienced, and powerful.*" Evidence of caretaking roles exhibited by participants included, helping other women get home safely and caring for their general well-being, especially if they were sick. Men's defined role of "*protector*" included walking women home or regulating the supply of drinks. Men were seen in roles of dominance, authority, and experienced in regard to alcohol use because they purchased, poured, and controlled its access, making them "*more knowledgeable and equipped to handle alcohol.*"

Sorority women who chose to engage in sexual relationships were described by participants as having a negative reputation on campus, whereas men who engaged in similar experiences were perceived to be held in high regard (by other men) for engaging in sexual encounters. Likewise, women who engaged in sexual relationships during these parties described sometimes having to adapt their personal values resulting in feelings of shame and guilt. Some women acknowledged making poor decisions while under the influence associated with sexual relationships. One woman described "*hooking up with a guy*" involving unprotected sex, in her words:

> "I don't even know if he remembers me because we were both fairly inebriated and I had class with him the semester after that and I just remember being so ashamed and at the same time, I'm like why am I ashamed? It was a mutual thing, but I was

really drunk…"

Other times women justified their behavior or minimized the potential serious consequences by attributing their decisions to a perceived lack of choice. This was most evident after a party stating; "*I don't really know how else to deal with it other than to laugh it off,*" or "*I was really drunk so it doesn't count.*"

Discussion

This qualitative study explains how within one campus environment, heavy episodic drinking is perceived as acceptable and almost expected, drinking behaviors are heavily influenced by a strongly male dominated environment, and sorority women alter their behavior in order to assimilate to this environment. In particular the identified themes "*campus drinking culture,*" "*drinking in a male dominated environment,*" and "*influence and risks associated with drinking in a man's world*" uncovered gender discrepancies, power differentials, and ways in which women adapt to the environment in order to conform to established gender norms. Results describe situations where women are faced with in congruencies related to their choice to drink, and socializing in a significantly male oriented domain resulted in modifying personal values and behaviors.

Themes suggest existing traditional gender roles embedded in this setting may contribute to power differentials and the marginalization of women. Similar to earlier research noted, (Bleeker & Murnen, 2005; Martin & Hummer, 1989; Rhoads, 1995) some fraternity parties were described as having an established patriarchal hierarchy. This was first evident regarding basic differences in quantity, frequency, and types of drinks held in high regard for men over women. Other patriarchal standards emerged regarding informal rules and norms established around acceptance to parties, whereas women were only allowed to gain entrance to parties if they met ambiguous and superficial standards set by men. Similarly, parties with sexually explicit

themes further exemplify gender norms associated with this setting.

One of the most apparent biases was evident with regard to the location where alcohol consumption occurred, identified as being predominately male dominated settings. Because women expressed strong opposition to drinking in their sorority house, and in particular if women were under the legal drinking age, they sought out other venues, most often fraternity houses. Women expressed an awareness of the gender biased environment (e.g., having to walk to/from fraternities, needing to know someone to gain entrance, and acting and dressing in different ways) but few had insight as to the implications of this social structure (e.g., giving up control, relinquishing choices, powerlessness). However none of the participants expressed the need to change this policy and little is mentioned in the literature about this inherent difference.

While many of the women acknowledged the existing power differentials, sometimes even expressing the injustices, they described feelings of ambivalence or lacked awareness to do anything about it. Some expressed discrepancies in their feelings toward the male dominated structure; for example, they enjoyed socializing with men, yet they didn't approve of the men's treatment of women, particularly the younger women; they expressed the themes of the parties as demeaning, yet they engaged in the role play; and they felt drinking only at fraternities was unfair, but admitted they wouldn't want strangers in their own house. As long as male dominated environments remain the primary choice for engaging in drinking, it is likely women will continue to conform to male standards.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Continued research and changes to prevention practices are needed to create safer and equitable campus settings for college women, specifically for sorority members. Although women in this study appeared cognizant at some level of existing gender inequalities and power differentials in the college drinking environment, more can be done to illuminate these differences. While education alone does not create behavior changes, raising awareness and insight is a critical first step. Authority figures and campus prevention specialist should know how existing gender biased drinking cultures contributes to the potential exploitation of women and may increase the risk of victimization. Similarly, sorority women need to be aware of how engaging in high risk drinking behaviors in a male dominated environment has implications in making personal decisions and maintaining control.

Greek letter organizations are a central core to many universities and have the potential to significantly impact the drinking culture. Influences on the drinking context should continue to be examined from both a macro and mezzo perspective. For example, from a national perspective, policies for fraternities/sororities established by the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) and the North American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) establish unequal standards for men and women from the onset. The impact of these policies may be an area for further exploration as other researchers have noted (Ackerman, 1990, Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 2001). Wechsler et al. (2009) noted college institutions are sending mixed messages by not holding fraternity and sorority members to institutionally approved standards of acceptable behavior. Finally, environmental norms of Greek letter organizations should be explored. It is important to note participants in this study expressed the desire and enjoyment in socializing with members of fraternities, therefore engaging men in their perception of the environment (rather than identifying them as targets of change) is central to this conversation. Working with these groups can help neutralize inequalities and power differentials inherent in these systems.

Most importantly, prevention efforts need to consider gender specific programming to address

women's issues of personal safety, empowerment to make choices, and to raise awareness of existing inequalities. As evident in this study, sorority women described venues where drinking occurs to shape their drinking choices and behaviors and expressed these differ from fraternity men. Prevention initiatives have overwhelmingly neglected the inherent male dominated drinking environment; likewise there is a significant gap in the literature with regard to environment. Further research on high risk drinking, the influence of gender, and the environment should include multiple perspectives, specifically soliciting male oriented social organizations, membership with diversity, under and upper level students, and other groups of women. Additionally, protective factors within sororities should be further examined to identify and raise awareness of the power they possess. The college drinking environment is complex system with inherent gender differences steeped deep into the college culture. Issues of gender inequality should not be ignored and the unique experiences of women need to be continually integrated into research and prevention programming. It is hoped this study may serve as an impetus for more research concerning the impact of environment and college student drinking.

References

Ackerman, J. (1990). The survival of Greek life: Concerns and solutions. *NASPA Journal, 28*, 78-81.

Bannon, R. S., Brosi, M., W., & Foubert, J. D. (2013). Sorority women's and fraternity men's rape myth acceptance and bystander intervention attitudes

Bleeker, E. T., & Murnen, S. K. (2005). Fraternity membership, the display of degrading sexual images of women, and rape myth acceptance. *Sex Roles, 53*, 487-493. doi: 10.1007/s11199-005-7136-6

Boswell, A. A., & Spade, J. Z. (1996). Why are some fraternities more dangerous places for women? *Gender and Society, 10*, 133-147. doi: 10.1177/08912496010002003

Cantrell, D.C. (1993). Alternative paradigms in environmental education research: The interpretive perspective. In R. Mrazek (ed.) *Alternative Paradigms in Environmental Research* (pp. 81-105). Troy, OH: North American Association of Environmental Education.

Caudill, B. D., Crosse, S. B., Campbell, B., Howard, J., Luckey, B., & Blane, H. T. (2006). High-risk drinking among college fraternity members. A national perspective. *Journal of American College Health, 55*, 141-155. doi: 10.3200/JACH.55.3.141-155

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches. Fourth Edition*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Glindemann, K. E., & Geller, E. S. (2003). A systematic assessment of intoxication at university parties: Effects of the environmental context. *Environment and Behavior, 35*, 655–664. doi: 10.1177/0013916503254751

Jansen, G. G., & Davis, D. R. (1998). Honoring voice and visibility: sensitive-topic research and feminist interpretive inquiry. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 13*(3), 289-312.

Kaya, A., Iwamoto, D. K., Grivel, M., Clinton, L., & Brady, J. (2016). The role of feminine and masculine norms in college women's alcohol use. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 17*(2), 206-214.

Keyes, K. M., Grant, B. F., Hasin, D. S. (2008). Evidence for closing gender gap in alcohol use, abuse, and dependence in the United States population. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 93*(1-2), 21-29.

Lewis, M. A., Litt, D. M., Blayney, J. A., Lostutter, T. W., Granato, H., Kilmer, J. R., & Lee, C. M. (2011). They drink how much and where? Normative perceptions by drinking contexts and their association to college students' alcohol consumption. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, 72* (5), 844-853. http://dx.doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2011.72.844

Martin, P.Y. & Hummer, R. A. (1989). Fraternities and rape on campus. *Gender and Society. 3*(4), 451-473.

National Panhellenic Conference Office. (2007). National Panhellenic Conference. Retrieved March 3, 2015, from Welcome to NPCWomen.org Web site: http://www.npcwomen.org

Park, A., Sher, K. J., & Krull, J. L. (2009). Selection and socialization of risky drinking during the college transition: The importance of microenvironments associated with specific living units. *Psychology of Addictive Behavior, 23*, 404-414. http://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0016293

Paschall, M. J., & Saltz, R. F. (2007). Relationships between college settings and student alcohol use before, during and after events: A multi-level study. *Drug and Alcohol Review, 26,* 635–644. doi: 10.1080/09595230701613601

Priest, H., Roberts, P., & Woods, L. (2002). An overview of three different approaches to the interpretation of qualitative data. Part 1: theoretical issues. *Nurse Practitioner, 10*(1), 30-42.

Rhoads, R. (1995). Whales, tales, dog piles and beer goggles: An ethnographic case study of fraternity life. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 26*(3), 306-323. doi: 10.1525/aeq.1995.26.3.05x0935y

Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2010). *An introduction to qualitative research. Learning in the field.* Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

SAMHSA. (2013). National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). Table 6.88B—Alcohol use in the past month among persons aged 18 to 22, by college enrollment status and demographic characteristics: Percentages, 2012 and 2013. Available at: http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DetTabsPDFWHTML2013/Web/HTML/NSDUH-DetTabsSect6pe-Tabs55to107-2013.htm#tab6.88b

Sher, K. J., Bartholow, B. D., & Nanda, S. (2001). Short and long term effects of fraternity and sorority membership on heavy drinking: A social norms perspective. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors. 15*(1), 52-51.

Szymanski, D. M., Moffitt, L. B., & Carr, E. R. (2011). Sexual objectification of women: Advances to theory and research. *The Counseling Psychologist. 39*(1), 6-38. DOI: 10.1177/0011000010378402

Turrisi, R., Mallett, K. A., Mastroleo, N. R., & Larimer, M. E. (2006). Heavy drinking in college students: Who is at risk and what is being done about it? *Journal of General Psychology*, Oct. (4), 401-420. doi: 10.3200/GENP.133.4.401-420

Wechsler, H., Kuh., G., & Davenport, A. E. (2009). Fraternities, sororities, and binge drinking: Results from a national study of American colleges. *NASPA Journal, 46*(3), 395-416.

Wechsler, H., Lee, J. E., Kuo, M., Seibring, M., Nelson, T.B., & Lee, H. (2002). Trends in college binge drinking during a period of increased prevention efforts: Findings from 4 Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Surveys: 1993-2001. *Journal of American College Health*, (50), 203-217. doi: 10.1080/07448480209595713

White, A., & Hingson, R. (2014). The burden of alcohol use. Excessive alcohol consumption and related consequences among college students. *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews, 35*(2), 201-218.

Wilsnack, S.C., Wilsnack, R.W., & Kantor, L. W. (2013). Focus On: Woman and the cost of alcohol use. *Journal of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 35*(2), 219-228. doi: 10.1111/acer.12544

Young, A. M., Morales, M., McCabe, S. E., Boyd, C., D'Arcy, H. D. (2005). Drinking like a guy: Frequent binge drinking among undergraduate women. *Substance Use & Misuse, 40*, 241-267. doi: 10.1081/JA-2000048464

Author Biography

Jill Russett, Ph.D., LPC, MAC is an Associate Professor and the Director of Field Education in the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology at Christopher Newport University. Her research focus includes college student drinking prevention and intervention and supporting the development and education of the next generation of addiction professionals. Jill may be contacted at Jill.Russett@cnu.edu