

# All beer and skittles?

## A qualitative pilot study of the role of alcohol in university college life

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This paper reports the results of a small qualitative pilot study on the role of alcohol in college life, undertaken at three residential colleges at an Australian university. Focus groups (involving 43 students aged between 17 and 23 years) investigated participants' views of the social functions of alcohol in the residential college environment. Participants regarded drinking as an entrenched and highly valued aspect of college culture at all three colleges. They portrayed alcohol as contributing in positive ways to 'sociability and relaxation' as well as 'bonding and social inclusion' at college. Although drinking was acknowledged as disruptive of students' sleep, study, and daily routines, such impacts were often played down or normalised. The article concludes that normative studies, with a particular focus on first-year students, may be fruitful avenues for reducing alcohol-related harm among college-based university students. Qualitative studies like the one reported here can provide detailed, context-specific information about 'local drinking cultures', which are essential for informed decision-making about intervention approaches and policy change.

### Introduction

The alcohol consumption habits of Australian young people are of great concern to parents, politicians, researchers, policy makers, educators and others. There are ongoing debates about whether Australians 'binge drink' more or less often than they did in the past, and, in academic circles, what constitutes 'a binge' (see also Alexandre & Bowen, 2004; Herring, Berridge & Thom, 2008). Regardless, it is well-documented that a large proportion of young peoples' drinking places them at risk of current and future harm, both in terms of health-related risks and other negative consequences (Chikritzhs, Pascal & Jones, 2004; McBride, Farrington & Midford, 2000; Toumbourou, Hemphill, McMorris, Catalano & Patton, 2009). University students, as a group, are often associated with problematic alcohol consumption. An Australian study reported 54 per cent of the university student sample consuming more than five standard drinks on a typical drinking occasion, and over two-thirds (69 per cent) drinking at hazardous or harmful levels (Roche & Watt, 1999). Research also

indicates that university students drink more than their same-age peers not engaged in tertiary studies (Dowling, Clark & Corney, 2006; Walker, 2000).

Accidental injury, assaults and other consequences of alcohol misuse are 'key concern of university leaders' (Perkins & Craig, 2006; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008) in the US and elsewhere. Alcohol use also has implications for other less dramatic (but no less important) issues including academic performance and student attrition (Martinez, Sher & Wood, 2008; Porter & Pryor, 2007; Powell, Williams & Wechsler, 2004). Despite 18 to 23-year-olds (and university students in particular) being identified as 'at risk' of alcohol-related harm, comparatively little work has been undertaken to identify problems and determine appropriate solutions (Roche & Watt, 2000, p. 390; see also Wilks, 1989). Furthermore, much of the existing research has a disciplinary basis in either psychology or epidemiology, and is dominated by quantitative methods.

This paper addresses an important gap in the literature by investigating students' views on the role of alcohol in college life, based on the results of a small qualitative pilot

study conducted at three residential colleges at an Australian university. It is, to the author's knowledge, the first Australian study of its kind. The underlying premise of the paper is that efforts to change university drinking cultures should be informed by a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the place of alcohol in college life. Without such an understanding, there is a risk of interventions or policy changes being ill-chosen and/or poorly received.

The paper briefly discusses the social-scientific research on university student drinking and provides a rationale for a sociological focus. After describing the research setting and methods, the paper then considers the findings relating to two key themes emerging from students' accounts. These themes are the ways in which alcohol use serves to enhance a) Sociability and relaxation, and b) Bonding and social cohesion at the colleges. The discussion then explores the 'flipside' of these positive contributions by considering Alcohol-related damage, disruption and disharmony resulting from alcohol use at the colleges. The paper highlights the tensions inherent in student accounts of alcohol consumption. Despite students' tendency to present drinking as making a positive contribution to residential college life, the situation is not 'all beer and skittles'. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study for future research and efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm among university students in Australia.

## University drinking cultures – the importance of 'the social'

The university setting has been noted as one which offers 'a unique social context for the consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol' (Roche & Watt, 1999). Problematic alcohol use among university students has a similar prevalence in Australasia, Europe, and South America, and a lower prevalence in Africa and Asia (Karam, Kypri & Salamoun, 2007). The international research evidence also confirms that university students experience a range of negative consequences as a result of their own and others' drinking (McAlaney & McMahon, 2007; McGee & Kypri, 2004; Roche & Watt, 2000; Sharmer, 2001; Simao *et al.*, 2008).

Additionally, residential colleges are often noted as being particularly 'wet' environments where residents drink heavily and often (Raskin White *et al.*, 2006). A number of major life landmarks (being granted permission to vote, drink, and hold a drivers licence) cluster together within the space of a few weeks or months for many first-year university students (Roche & Watt 1999), although this pattern is changing with the increasing popularity of

gap-years and mature-age entry (McKenzie & Gow, 2007). For many students at residential colleges, their first year at university involves a significant reduction in 'parental surveillance' (see also Casswell, Pledger & Pratap, 2002).

As noted above, much research on alcohol consumption among university students takes a psychological or epidemiological approach (see for example Alexandre & Bowen, 2004; Baer, 2002; Davey, Davey & Obst, 2002). A smaller, but growing body of research investigates the influence of norms, perceptions and other socio-cultural processes (Berkowitz, 1997; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis & Fossos, 2007; Perkins, 2002; Roche & Watt, 1999). As Hansen (1997, p. 155) explains, so-called 'socio-ecological' theories postulate that

instead of looking for causes within the individual... we should focus on the social system... Clearly, some causes of substance abuse lie within the individual, and these should not be ignored. Social ecology theory, however, seeks causes primarily in the social environment. Consequently, efforts to modify use must focus on changing the person's environment rather than the person.

Following Hansen, this study is concerned to shed light on the social 'place' of alcohol in college life, which makes qualitative methods an appropriate data collection choice. Arguably, small local studies of this kind can improve understanding of 'local drinking cultures' to guide decision-making about subsequent interventions and policy change (see also Mullen, Watson, Swift & Black, 2007; Sheehan & Ridge, 2001).

## Research setting

This pilot study was undertaken at three residential colleges (which have been given pseudonyms) at an Australian university. Barton College and Stewart College are located within the University's main campus, with a single administration team overseeing both colleges. Barton and Stewart Colleges have approximately 170 and 100 residents, respectively. Just over 50 per cent ( $n=135$ ) of residents are male, around 50 per cent of residents are international students ( $n=130$ ), and more than 50 ( $n=140$ ) per cent of residents are first-year students. Farrell College is a residential college of the University, located near the main campus. There are currently approximately 190 residents, approximately 55 per cent ( $n=104$ ) of whom are male. By contrast with Barton and Stewart, approximately 15 per cent ( $n=28$ ) of Farrell residents are international students. Fifteen per cent ( $n=28$ ) are from interstate and the majority of the remainder are from other regions of the state. More than half the residents are first-year students at the University.

## Methods

The data for this article were collected using focus groups undertaken with approval from the relevant Human Research Ethics Committee (number H10533). The focus groups were all audio-taped with consent. All college residents were invited (via posters, emails, and announcements at dinners) to participate in focus groups. No inducements to participate were offered. A semi-structured focus group guide was used to investigate perceptions of the role of alcohol in college life and their alcohol-related experiences.

## Participants

Five focus groups were conducted, involving a total of 43 students. Posters inviting participation were displayed at each of the colleges. The comparatively low response rate may have been a function of the issue (i.e. students deemed that the topic was not worthy of their time) or the fact that no inducements to be involved were offered (in fact the Ethics Committee expressly forbade inducements), and/or some other unforeseen factors. Male and female focus groups were, where possible, conducted separately to assist both genders to more freely express their views. At one college, an additional mixed-gender international student focus group was conducted, due to a high proportion of international students. There were two all-female groups involving 14 students, two all-male groups involving 15 students, and a separate focus group of 14 international students which had a roughly equal gender balance. The youngest focus group participant was 17 and the eldest was 23, with most participants aged 18 or 19. Participants were not asked to identify as drinkers or non-drinkers.

## Analysis

The focus groups were transcribed and a coding guide was developed. Due to the small number of data collection sites and participants, a decision was made to work with electronic and hard-copy versions of the transcripts rather than use a qualitative analysis software package such as NVivo. The coding guide was drawn from themes in the literature relating to youth alcohol consumption and socio-cultural influences on drinking. Those themes related to, *inter alia*, peer pressure & normative perceptions, gender & drinking practices, negative consequences of consumption, college alcohol policies, and the relationship between alcohol and sport. Initial coding (undertaken by two researchers, independently) involved identifying broad patterns in the data, while subsequent analytical work involved further refinement and exploration of themes. A particular priority was to explore participants'

perspectives on the 'place' of alcohol at the residential colleges rather than individuals' drinking behaviours or other psychological risk/protective factors. The analysis also investigated students' views of the consequences of drinking. Although international students were involved in a separate group, there was little to differentiate their discussions from those involved in the other groups.

## Findings

This section of the paper outlines the findings of the qualitative pilot study. It commences with a brief overview of the 'patterns of consumption' identified by focus group participants, who indicated that heavier alcohol use at college is associated with particular days of the week, times in the academic semester, years of study and types of social events. At one college, Monday nights were popular nights for drinking, with residents consuming alcohol provided (free of charge) at the Formal Dinner, then drinking at local hotels. At another college, Wednesday night was Formal Dinner night, but residents were required to purchase alcohol at the dinner. It was also common for these students to 'party on' afterwards at local venues. Focus group participants believed that hotels capitalised on this situation through deliberate marketing strategies (such as 'half price nights') to attract students and enable college residents to have a 'big' night at minimal cost.

Early in first semester and late in second semester were also reportedly associated with heavier drinking. According to a female participant from Farrell College, 'At the start of the semester everyone's drinking heaps. Then everyone stops going out so much'. Similarly, a male participant from Barton College noted that 'Around exam time or...when there are heaps of assignments, people don't tend to go out so much'. Participants also perceive that alcohol consumption depends, to a certain extent, on which year of College someone is in - with second and third year students consuming less than first year students (see also Bewick *et al.*, 2008). Certainly, several first-year participants (i.e. 'freshers') reported that since moving to College they had started drinking more, and more frequently, than they had previously.

Lastly, participants reported that heavier alcohol use by college residents was associated with organised social events and college sports. These two topics shed light on different aspects of two key themes that emerged from students' accounts of the contributions of alcohol to residential college life. The themes of Sociability and relaxation and Bonding and social cohesion are now examined in turn.

### ***Sociability and relaxation***

A recurring theme in focus group discussions at all three colleges was the contribution of alcohol to social functioning and relaxation for students. The fun and pleasurable aspects of drinking with friends featured prominently in many conversations. Participants also spoke of drinking as an important strategy for stress-relief:

We have stressful lives with all our assignments and working and everything, so alcohol and socialising is like a way to relieve and have a bit of enjoyment (Male, Farrell College).

The annual College Ball at each of the colleges was particularly associated with heavy consumption and was a major event in many residents' social calendars. Pre- and post-Ball functions are held, including pre-dinner drinks at a nearby bar, and parties afterwards which sometimes continue until the next day. Several first-year students made comments like 'I'm really excited about it. Everyone says it's the best night of the year'. Some returning students spoke favourably about the Ball, but not all of them intended to go. The financial aspect was frequently mentioned, with one participant stating that he was not prepared to pay money to go to an event he did not think he would enjoy. Participants noted the tendency of some students to drink to excess at the Ball to ensure they receive 'value for money'. As explained by a female Farrell College participant:

It's ... unlimited drinks, so \$110 including drinks, as much as you can drink, and that's often seen as the way to go... I want to get my money's worth.

On the other hand, the financial outlay could also function in the opposite direction - for instance another female participant reported only having three drinks at the previous year's ball because she did not want to ruin her dress. Despite initially stating that the Ball is a night of sustained drinking for many, students wanted to clarify that 'it's not just about drinking':

There's a band there, really good food, it's not just about the alcohol at all, it's about sitting at a table with ten or so of your friends, just enjoying the night (Male, Barton College).

### ***Bonding and social cohesion***

The positive contribution of alcohol consumption to sociability was frequently noted during focus groups. Drinking games (i.e. games involving either individuals or teams, in which aim is to 'out drink' one another and/or become intoxicated as quickly as possible) were mentioned in relation to facilitating social interaction between residents, with many students commenting

that they are a good way to socialise and meet new people. Students mentioned the use of 'beer bongs' (i.e. custom-made drinking devices which hold large quantities of alcohol) and similar items in popular drinking games (particularly after college sporting events), despite their use being contrary to college rules and regulations.

For example, a male Farrell College student commented:

There's sometimes up to thirty people playing (a drinking game) which is really good because you see different social groups mixing before they go out and go their separate ways.

The international students were also asked their views about drinking games. Overall they suggested that drinking games/parties were not a negative thing and that they provided an opportunity to meet and interact with people.

The role of alcohol in building and sustaining friendship groups was noted by many participants. Females, in particular, stressed the extent to which College residents looked after their friends and the environment in which they drink is safe. For instance:

I reckon most of the time if people have too much (alcohol) their friends will ... put them to bed, or start getting water into them. We all look out for each other so something bad rarely happens (Female, Barton College)

The link between alcohol consumption and college sport was emphasised by students at all three colleges. Female Stewart College participants also perceived that males put more pressure on each other to drink than do females, especially after sporting events. The sport/drinking connection is highlighted by the following excerpt:

After ... sport we go to an 'old boy's' house and have drinks there ... After cricket, rugby and football, we have parties, usually here. (Male, Barton College)

One male participant summed up the College sport/heavy drinking connection: 'it's a sport thing - it's part of the sports teams tradition'.

Given the emphasis placed on the centrality of drinking to college life, it was appropriate to explore whether students' status as 'drinkers' or 'non-drinkers' affected their acceptance within social groupings. Both male and female residents of Farrell College reported that extent to which drinking assisted students to 'fit in' depended on the group they were in:

Some groups are interested in drinking and others aren't. I don't think people who don't drink feel left out (Male, Farrell College).

Similarly, international students suggested that 'fitting in' was more dependent on confidence and personality than on alcohol consumption. However, the potential for

subtle and unintentional social exclusion exists, as suggested in the following discussion.

### ***Alcohol-related damage, disruption and disharmony***

While many students acknowledged that drinking is an important part of college culture, they were also quick to point out that it is 'not a destructive drinking culture'. Some students (presumably drinkers) suggested that college staff think student drinking is more of a problem than it actually is because they only hear about it when something bad happens. In general terms, the participants did not regard drinking by college students as a problem; they reiterated that it is rare for 'things to get out of hand', and that most residents drink responsibly.

However, specific questioning about social events and college sports revealed that alcohol-related harm is a reality at times. For instance, drinking at the ball has resulted in the need for medical intervention, people being removed from the venue, and people vomiting at the table. Residents from all colleges recalled post-sport celebrations (or commiserations) 'turning ugly'. One female Stewart College participant recalled a particular barbecue after an inter-college football game:

We had a (liquor) licence and thought people would just have a beer but it kind of escalated. One person drank a whole bottle of spirits, and there were drinking games and stuff. It was probably the messiest night this year, so far.

Although several students insisted that the colleges do not have 'destructive drinking cultures', vomit did feature prominently in all focus group discussions. Participants spoke of seeing and hearing people vomit – in bedrooms, hallways, stairwells and out of windows. They also commented on the unpleasantness of lingering odour from vomit, and on incidents where toilet seats were broken. One male Barton participant commented that he 'wasn't bothered' by students vomiting after drinking, then added that 'generally people are pretty responsible. They'll do it outside'.

Drinking also appeared to cause disruption to many participants' study, sleep and daily routines. Residents reported planning their study to avoid 'drinking nights' – for instance, a male Farrell College participant noted that it was often so noisy and difficult to concentrate on Monday nights that he avoided studying 'until everyone has gone to the pub'. Some female students routinely avoided using certain bathrooms on certain mornings since they were 'always disgusting' after drinking nights.

The potential contribution of drinking to social exclusion was explored during the focus groups. Despite empha-

sising the centrality of drinking to college culture, the students who participated wished to maintain that 'drinking is not that important', that 'not everyone drinks' and that 'people who don't drink aren't left out'. For instance, one Farrell student commented that she has 'a number of friends here who don't drink, but they always come out and are the life of the party. Similar stories emerged from residents of the other colleges. Unfortunately, it was not possible in this study to ascertain whether self-identified non-drinkers concurred with this view. It seems likely that the image of 'happy inclusion' of non-drinkers at college is somewhat oversimplified – but examination of that issue is a task for future studies.

### ***Alcohol at College: all beer and skittles?***

Results of this study accord with Roche and Watt's observation that alcohol 'is often central to the social and sporting life of students' (2000, p. 389). The participants were generally positive about the contribution of college drinking to sociability and social cohesion. Students from all three colleges claimed that drinking is 'not compulsory' at their college, that abstainers and light drinkers are never ostracised, and the extent to which individuals 'fit in' is more a function of their personality and outlook than on their drinking. However, the absence of a 'teetotallers' focus group' (or anonymous mechanisms for providing comment) mean that it is not possible to assess the accuracy of these claims, which were presumably made by drinkers.

As noted above, the focus group participants recounted numerous anecdotes of their own and other peoples' vomit, hangovers, accidental injuries as a result of drinking alcohol. However, the short- and longer-term health risks of alcohol consumption were conspicuous by their absence from participants' accounts. Similar to the Australian teenagers in Taylor and Carroll's 2001 study (2001, p. 23), participants in this study seemed not to associate short-term consequences of alcohol consumption (such as vomiting, hangover and loss of consciousness) with harm to their health.

Participants' experiences of 'second-hand effects of alcohol' (including having their sleep and/or or study interrupted) were numerous. Yet there was a tendency for students to overlook or downplay disturbances if they were 'caused' by alcohol. Social processes and normative influences are salient here, since students may be less likely to express annoyance about noise pollution or inconsiderate behaviour if they perceive that 'everyone else is cool with it' (see for example Berkowitz, 2004).

## Implications and conclusion

This paper has taken a sociological, qualitative approach to the issue of drinking among residential college students attending an Australian university. It heeds Mancini-Pena and Tyson's (2007, p. 36) call for research that reveals how young people understand their drinking, to assist policy-makers and health professionals to better understand and communicate with the youth population. The paper has demonstrated that many of the participants regard alcohol as an intrinsic aspect of the college experience. Drinking is positively regarded for its contribution to sociability and relaxation, and bonding and social cohesion among residents. However, alcohol's contribution to damage, disruption and disharmony coexists somewhat uncomfortably with some students' desire to see college drinking cultures as 'safe' and 'not destructive'.

This study has investigated the understandings participants have of their own and others' drinking, and the social functions of alcohol use in the residential college environment. It does, however, have a number of limitations. One limitation is

the small sample size, meaning that the results are not generalisable to wider settings or populations. However, at least some of the issues may be salient in other Australian residential colleges. Additionally, as a 'snapshot' in time, it does not convey the changing demographic profile of college residents reflective of broader changes in student enrolments, including the increasing proportions of mature-age and international students. Lastly, the use of focus groups may have had the unintended consequence of discouraging participants from frank discussion of their opinions and experiences. Issues relating to international students and the experience of non-drinkers could benefit from individualised data collection methods and more detailed consideration in future studies. A more comprehensive study would involve mixed methods, a larger number of residential colleges from different states, data collection methods that would allow anonymity and thereby encourage honest answering (such as online surveys), and perhaps also incorporate objective measures of alcohol consumption.

This paper commenced with a statement of the importance of 'the social system' and of the need to address

risky drinking by aiming to change 'the environment' rather than 'the person'. Accordingly, it has highlighted the benefits of examining 'drinking cultures' rather than focusing on individuals' levels of knowledge or other factors that may predispose them to problematic alcohol consumption (see also Hughes, Julian, Richman, Mason & Long, 2008). It has also revealed the complex interplay of wider contextual factors (such as availability, pricing, and special promotions) and the local 'social environment' (such as norms and perceptions of alcohol use) in particular settings.

The findings of this study suggest that interventions focused on the normative environment (perceptions of peers' alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours) should be investigated by Australian universities seeking to

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reduce alcohol-related harm among their students. They also suggest that approaches targeting first-year students hold excellent potential for influencing college drinking cultures in positive ways (see also Kypri, Langley, McGee, Saunders & Williams, 2002). The fact that 'freshers' are in the midst of developing new social networks provides an opportune envi-

ronment to investigate how those networks influence alcohol-related perceptions and behaviour (McAlaney, Bewick & Hughes, 2011).

This paper has focused on the issue of student drinking cultures in university residential colleges. It has investigated the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which alcohol consumption influences college residents' lives, experiences and interactions with others. The study has reinforced the importance of learning about students' worldviews and receptiveness to different types of prevention intervention. Arguably, studies of this kind are required to improve understanding of the complex 'place of alcohol' in specific social contexts. These understandings are essential for guiding decision-making about alcohol-focused interventions, future research and policy development.

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