

Alcohol Acculturation: Analyzing College Drinking Culture

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Despite decades of prevention and educational efforts, research, and millions of dollars spent on campus staff, initiatives, and training (McMurtrie, 2014), more than 1,800 college students die each year from unintended alcohol-related injuries (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), 2015). A 2002 survey conducted by the NIAAA (2002b) found that 19% of students surveyed between the ages of 18 and 24 met the criteria for an alcohol use disorder. Considerable financial and human resources in higher education are dedicated to dismantling binge drinking on college campuses, but few significant gains have been made nationally. “Educators and researchers...say that a combination of exhaustion, frustration, inertia, lack of resources and campus and community politics derailed the national conversation about college drinking. Taking on the problem proved tougher than anyone thought” (McMurtrie, 2014, para. 22).

Given all of the resources, research, and programming dedicated to limiting or eliminating it, how has college drinking culture managed to survive, even thrive, on college campuses across the United States? The long history and persistence of binge drinking as a cultural phenomenon on American college campuses suggests that new and innovative ways of examining the problem may be warranted. This paper will use a cultural anthropological lens, and more specifically, the concepts of diffusion and acculturation, to consider college drinking as a cultural phenomenon and make recommendations for research and practice that can be drawn from this new approach.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Anthropology

Anthropology is an “integrated complex of disciplines that examines the development, unity

and diversity of the human species, considered from biological and cultural perspectives” (Winthrop, 1991, p. 12). The word *anthropology* comes from the Greek terms *anthropos* (human) and *logos* (discourse), quite literally a discussion or study of humanity and its cultures (Winthrop, 1991). Anthropology has four subdisciplines: biological anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology. While each of these subdisciplines may have value in terms of their use in studying cultural patterns in higher education, we will focus on cultural anthropology and two of its concepts—diffusion and acculturation—to probe the longevity and persistence of drinking culture in U.S. colleges and universities.

Cultural anthropology documents the socially established patterns of thought and behavior in contemporary or near-contemporary societies (Winthrop, 1991). This branch of anthropology can be distinguished from other social sciences by its “insistence on research through open-ended participation, by a holistic frame of reference in which any element of belief or behavior must be understood in its total social context, and by a theoretical concern with the mediation of behavior and experience by culture” (Winthrop, 1991, pp. 13-14).

From an ontological perspective, cultural anthropologists ascribe to *holism*, the idea that each culture is an integrated whole, “not static by any means and not always completely internally consistent, but consisting of deeply interconnected parts” (Eller, 2015, p. 12). This idea of holism and cultures existing as real, definable elements in the world undergirds the ontology of cultural anthropology as a paradigm. In terms of epistemology, cultural anthropologists believe cultures can be understood only on their own terms, relative to their own beliefs, values, practices, institutions, and histories (Eller, 2015). They seek to

know “humanity in its full behavioral and cultural diversity” (Eller, 2015, p. 12). Comparison, contextualization, and ethnography are the primary methodological vehicles for identifying what can be known about culture in cultural anthropology. Comparative study, or the comparative method, involves identifying and comparing traits of different cultures (Bloch, 2010). Cultural anthropologists collect this data about cultures through fieldwork and participant observation, which was defined by Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski, two founding fathers of cultural anthropology, as follows:

the researcher must “go in person to the society s/he wants to study and spend a long time—normally a year or more— making on-site observations... The anthropologist must live among—and as far as possible, live like—the people s/he studies (Eller, 2015, p. 36).

Participant observation yields field notes, which are filtered and interpreted through the comparative method and placed in a larger cultural context. From this research process, cultural anthropologists produce ethnographies, a form of writing that “focuses on a particular population, place, and time with the goal of describing it to others” (Sanjek, 2010, p. 246). With regard to axiology in research, cultural anthropologists value positionality and avoidance of ethnocentrism; the goal is to get so close to the culture under study that anthropologists can understand the subject through the culture’s own perspective.

Diffusion and Acculturation

Within cultural anthropology, the concept of diffusionism emerged during the Renaissance. Diffusionist theory became more fully formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by anthropologists seeking means for understanding how cultural traits moved from one society to another (Kulick, 2010). Diffusionist theory “presumes that... the major route of progress in culture history has been through the spread of civilization from a very few culture centers” (Winthrop, 1991, p. 83). In the late 1800’s

and early 1900’s, anthropologists applied diffusionism when attempting to explain the appearance of distinct culture elements, such as religious rituals or medical practices, in the historical records of societies from geographically distant parts of the world. The earliest diffusionist thinkers believed that all culture in the world emerged from ancient Egypt; the cultural patterns and elements of this society were then spread around the world through trade, travel, and colonization by the peoples influenced by that society (Harris, 2001).

Diffusionism, and its implication that human culture had been invented once or at most a few times, is no longer used by cultural anthropologists in their studies of the transmission, migration, and survival of cultures, but the resulting concepts of diffusion and acculturation are still applied to understand how cultures endure and adapt over time (Eller, 2015). *Diffusion* can be defined as the spread of cultural elements between societies and across social boundaries (Eller, 2015). As cultures come into contact with one another, and if that contact is sustained over long periods of time, *acculturation* may occur. Acculturation is “culture change under the condition of direct contact between the members of two societies” (Winthrop, 1991, p. 3). The term acculturation can be used to describe the process of cultural transformation resulting from contact between two societies. Acculturation generally occurs in conditions of inequality, where one culture is larger, more powerful, or more technologically advanced than the other involved (Eller, 2015). The concepts of diffusion and acculturation are used in contemporary cultural anthropology in tracking the movement of culture and to describe the transmission of cultural traits from one group to another.

Cultural anthropology and the concepts of diffusion and acculturation are well suited to examining cultural patterns in higher education. While education researchers are rightly drawn to use of student development theories originating in psychology when studying the cultural phenomena

occurring among college students, cultural anthropology and its ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological underpinnings provide a sensible alternative for examining the persistent problem of binge drinking culture on college campuses.

Cultural Anthropological Analysis

Giroux (1981) defines the hidden curriculum as “the Awareness of alcohol misuse and heavy consumption across college campuses is not new. Documentation of anecdotal reports of alcohol problems on college campuses can be found in the United States spanning for at least the past 50 years (Goldman, 2002). College students are at higher risk of binge drinking than their peers who do not attend college (Dowdall & Wechsler, 2002) and this excessive drinking is associated with a variety of severely detrimental health, vocational, property, and criminal consequences that impact not only the individual but also the entire college community. In order to lessen or even eradicate the effects of these consequences, higher education administrators must reframe the ways in which they approach the culture of binge drinking on their campuses.

Defining Culture

College drinking is a culture of its own, which makes cultural anthropology an excellent resource for studying and understanding it as a problem in higher education. One only needs to watch a film or television show that depicts the college drinking scene to understand how the college drinking experience is interwoven throughout popular culture. Scholars and researchers repeatedly refer to the college drinking “culture” in their work (NIAAA, 2002a; Tan, 2012; Vander Ven, 2011).

In anthropology, “culture” has been defined and redefined over decades of research. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, culture in anthropology was defined as “the distinctive patterns of thought, action, and value that characterize the members of a society or social

group” (Winthrop, 1991, p. 50). Over time, however, distinctions between cultures have broken down or become more fluid with developments in technology and increasing globalization. The definition of culture in cultural anthropology has expanded away from the idea of wholly separate cultures as entities to a decidedly less orderly collection of concepts (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Contemporary cultural anthropology, rather than settling on a formal definition, instead conceptualizes culture as a set of key concepts and features:

- Culture is learned through *enculturation* and *socialization*, the “active mastering of social knowledge and skill through observing and interacting with other people (Eller, 2015, p. 26);
- Culture is not a trait of the individual but is instead shared across a group, though we understand that not every person in a group has the same traits and all cultures also have sub-, counter-, and regional cultural differences;
- Culture is symbolic and can be understood as a system of shared symbols and meanings;
- Culture is integrated, a “complex whole composed of many parts in active and functional interconnection” (Eller, 2015, p. 28); and
- Culture is adaptive, meaning cultures can adapt and change in response to the environment inhabited.

When using these key concepts of culture to explore diffusion and acculturation within a society, it is critical to also examine the power structures in place to identify the *direction* of acculturation. As Eller (2015) noted, the diffusion of cultural traits from one group to another usually hinges on the power distance between groups, and which group is seen to have more influence or advantage in a larger society.

Indeed, college drinking is a culture with its own rituals, artifacts, and meanings. As Treis, Wolburg, and Otnes (1999) explain:

Drinking requires an artifact (the alcohol itself), a script (rules about who can and cannot drink legally, when and where the drinking will occur, agreements about transportation to and from the place where drinking occurs), a performance role (how to drink, how many drinks to consume, how to behave while drinking), and audience (peers, bartenders, campus personnel) (p. 19).

Through the cultural anthropological lens, we can thus define the phenomenon of college drinking culture using the same cultural concepts. College drinking culture is:

- *learned* by new members of a campus community through acculturation and observation of behavior among members of the community;
- *shared* broadly by a campus community, defined by both those who engage in it and those sub- and counter-cultures who do not;
- *symbolic*, with its own collection of rituals, artifacts and symbols that create meaning understood across the campus community;
- *integrated*, a complex network of behaviors and social norms that function together to form its meaning; and
- *adaptive*, in that it can change and evolve as the circumstances and pressures on drinking culture do so.

Defining college drinking culture through a cultural anthropological lens aids in unmasking its complexity and in understanding why it is inherently challenging to lessen or eradicate its influence in the larger campus context.

In addition to possessing its own rites of passage, college drinking culture is also shaped by environmental factors. There are many biological and psychological factors that contribute to an individual's propensity to engage in high-risk drinking (Goldman, Boyd, & Faden, 2002). Several studies, however, have concluded environmental

factors are also significant contributors. For example, Timberlake et al. (2007) found “exposure to college environments acts as an environmental moderator, supporting the hypothesis that the magnitude of genetic influence on certain aspects of alcohol consumption is greater in environments where drinking behaviors are more likely to be promoted” (p. 40). Dowdall (2013) explained the impact of environment on established drinking habits and the “ritual that students often see as an integral part of their higher-education experience” (p. 198). Vander Ven (2011) also related drinking culture to a study regarding the use of marijuana where researchers found the process of intoxication to be social and learned through other “co-conspirators” thereby reinforcing the need to approach college drinking not as just an individual experience but rather a “collaborative effort” (p. 8). Researchers, therefore, cannot separate the impact of environment and other cultural factors when evaluating college drinking culture. In order to understand the holistic experience of this culture, researchers must examine far more than the actual problem of the heavy consumption of alcohol, including environmental and genetic factors that contribute to the problem.

The roots of college drinking culture run deep and are difficult to eradicate despite the many intervention and educational efforts as well as the known negative consequences of heavy drinking. To understand why this culture persists, we need to “explore the allure, joy, collective celebrations and bonding rituals associated with heavy drinking” (Vander Ven, 2011, p. 15). In order to reframe current research, however, educators must do more than understand the culture of college drinking; they must determine why the culture is passed on from year to year and class to class. Using cultural anthropology concepts of diffusion and acculturation can help to better understand the persistence of college drinking culture.

College Drinking Culture and Power

Research indicates the following types of students are most likely to engage in heavy

drinking: males, White students, members of fraternities and sororities, and athletes (NIAAA, 2002a). In the college context, these groups often demonstrate outsized influence and power, status afforded to them by higher education's legacy of catering to the White social elite in the United States (Thelin, 2004) and the pervasive influence of athletics in U.S. popular culture (Pope, 2007). When using the anthropological concept of acculturation to frame college drinking culture, one must consider which groups on campus are most powerful. First-year students, the newest members of a campus community, have the least amount of power and influence on a college campus. The power distance between first-year students and those already embedded in college drinking culture suggests that first-years are more likely to engage in heavy drinking during their first six weeks of college before they have become assimilated into the campus community and begin to join additional groups (NIAAA, 2002a). The weak cultural status and power position of new students suggests that without intervention, first-years are likely to experience some degree of acculturation into high-risk drinking behavior when a dominant college drinking culture is present on campus.

Implications for Research and Practice

Cultural anthropology and the concepts of diffusion and acculturation provide an alternative lens for viewing college drinking culture in U. S. higher education and suggest several implications for both continued research on the topic and the work of higher education administrators seeking to lessen its negative effects.

Implications for Research

Researchers seeking to study college drinking culture may find cultural anthropology useful in framing research questions and selecting methodological approaches. In particular, we encourage researchers to replicate research frameworks seen in fraternity/sorority literature that apply anthropological lenses to examine college

drinking culture and employ ethnographic methods when possible to broaden and deepen first-hand knowledge of the problem in its various college contexts.

Researchers studying fraternities and sororities have long embraced a cultural anthropological approach to examining ritualized drinking behaviors in these organizations (Kuh & Arnold, 1992; Kuh & Arnold, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Heath (1987) observed "that a long-term strength of anthropological studies have been that they have paid attention... to alcohol as artifact and to the complex of attitudes, values, and actions that are associated with it" (p. 18). Our review of the literature showed most references to cultural anthropology as a theoretical framework for understanding college drinking lie within the fraternity/sorority literature. We encourage researchers to consider cultural anthropology as a theoretical lens for studying college drinking culture at large, not just within fraternity/sorority communities.

Much of the research about college drinking culture uses quantitative data collection, such as Harvard's College Alcohol Study, which surveyed more than 14,000 students from 1993 to 2001 and again in 2005 (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). Researchers have also incorporated the use of qualitative research to help tell a better story about college drinking and the ways in which students drink (Vander Ven, 2011). Ethnography, commonly deployed by researchers in cultural anthropology, provides a qualitative framework for studying college drinking culture. Ethnographic research could assist practitioners in developing a deeper awareness of the problem *from the inside* and access to an intimate understanding of the rituals, symbols, and behaviors surrounding this entrenched culture on college campuses. In ethnographic research, the ethnographer

aims to document how the people see and talk about their everyday social activities and groupings, and the wider worlds they live in. It is their normal scenes of activity, topics of conversation and standards of

evaluation that are objects of ethnographic fieldwork (Sanjek, 2010, p. 247).

The nuances gleaned from the types of interactions required by ethnographic research could augment findings from quantitative research on college drinking culture and provide a deeper level of understanding to supplement even qualitative findings.

Ethnographic research on college drinking culture could also provide student affairs professionals and education researchers with rich data about the acculturation process of new community members, especially with a focus on the first weeks of college life experienced by new students. Doing so would require ethnographic fieldwork to examine decision-making around alcohol, as well as personal and social proclivities among the newest members of the college community that lead to diffusion and acculturation into the college drinking scene. This type of research would present its own challenges for education researchers, such as how to get “inside” the first-year experience to see it through the eyes of new students faced with pressure to acclimate to drinking culture. Given the continued prevalence of drinking culture and its associated problems for college campuses, an ethnographic research approach is worthy of exploration.

Implications for Practice

Conclusions from the research “solving” the college drinking problem tend to focus on ways to help individual students with their own alcohol problems (Dowdall, 2013). Although student-focused solutions may help to alleviate the impact of the drinker on non-drinkers and other environmental factors (e.g., violence, property destruction), they do not take into consideration how “co-drinkers work together to manage the ill effects of drunkenness” (Vander Ven, 2011, p 18). As noted, college drinking culture, when defined in a cultural anthropological sense, is *shared*, which means co-drinkers’ management of these ill effects helps to perpetuate the presence and power of the culture as a whole. Alcohol educators,

then, may want to help students, and first years in particular, understand the negative effects of co-drinkers’ enablement of drunken behavior. For example, a student willing to lie to protect a friend or roommate who is having problems with alcohol may enable that friend to do even more self-harm. Illuminating the ways small actions like this example strengthen drinking culture may help students better understand their unintended complicity in its macro-level effects.

Campus practitioners who work with fraternities and sororities may also want to examine the potential role the fraternity/sorority community may have in perpetuating campus drinking culture. Acculturation generally takes place because a stronger culture in a power position influences a weaker one. If fraternities and sororities have well-known and documented drinking behaviors, cultural norms surrounding binge drinking within these groups may more easily diffuse into the broader student culture. Practitioners on campuses with strong fraternity/sorority communities may want to consider ways to create more balance in order to shift the power stance of these organizations. This approach could involve programmatic investment in alternative options for students seeking community, such as development of living-learning communities or alcohol-free weekend events.

Social norming campaigns also allow educators to reframe the binge drinking culture on college campuses. These campaigns employ advertising and educational efforts to share the normative consumption behavior of college students so that their binge-drinking peers might understand they are in fact drinking more than the “norm” (Vander Ven, 2011). Social norming may be considered a controlled diffusion of cultural norms and ideals in order to influence the broader college culture. The College of William and Mary infused social norming into their recent social marketing strategy by advertising the statistics of students who engage in healthy behaviors rather than focusing on the negative statistics (S. Menefee, personal communication, November 10, 2015). For example, posters entitled “W&M students are healthier than

you think” are found across campus and cite facts such as “65% (of students) had 4 or fewer drinks the last time they partied” and “1 in 7 (students) have never consumed alcohol” (S. Menefee, personal communication, November 10, 2015).

Researchers also call for campuses to accept certain forms of drinking as healthy under specific conditions rather than focusing on a zero-tolerance policy for underage students (Tan, 2012). By incorporating the concept of healthy drinking behaviors into the student experience, practitioners could “conceive a new breed of interventions that [would] educate and empower students on how they can maximize the social and development benefits for healthy forms of drinking while eliminating risky drinking that leads to undesirable consequences” (Tan, 2012). This type of education could possibly intertwine social norming and appropriate consumption and give students new ways to address their approaches to drinking and help to shift the college drinking culture.

Additionally, because of their unique relationship with students and position of authority on college campuses, the role faculty could play in the acculturation of healthy drinking behaviors on campus should also be explored.

Practitioners should also consider how zero tolerance policies might result in unintended consequences. In response to an administration condemning underage college drinking in all forms, college students may engage in risky drinking behaviors in defiance of the culture universities seek to create. A great deal of the acculturation of college drinking behaviors and rituals occurs during the first weeks of college, when first-year students are certainly the weaker, more vulnerable cultural group on campus. In order to change the ways in which this acculturation occurs, practitioners should explore how influential social groups affect the acclimation of new students. It would be useful for education researchers to evaluate the interactions between first-year students and campus groups that are known to engage in heavy drinking to consider means of lessening the diffusion of these new

community members into existing campus drinking culture.

Conclusion

College drinking culture is one of the most researched topics in U. S. higher education. Although current qualitative and quantitative approaches to studying this problem provide useful insights into the impact of heavy drinking on individual students, less work has been done to explore the holistic cultural environment that perpetuates drinking culture. The persistence of drinking culture on college campuses suggests that alternative approaches to its research may be beneficial and necessary. Because college drinking behaviors are learned through acculturation and shared across a community with its own set of symbols, college drinking can and should be considered a complex and adaptive culture. Using a cultural anthropological framework, in tandem with the concepts of diffusion and acculturation, allows researchers to reframe methods for addressing the problem of heavy drinking. The use of acculturation and diffusion in studying drinking culture also encourages researchers to acknowledge power groups and consider how they influence new students, as well as redefine educational efforts through the use of social norming. Reframing college drinking culture using cultural anthropology may offer researchers alternative ways to study the problem and provide new insights into reducing its impact on college campuses.

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