



Natural Drinking Groups: An in-depth Examination of Ingroup Dynamics in the Context of College Drinking



Abstract

College students typically consume alcohol in groups rather than individually. Research on these “natural drinking groups” (NDGs) is lacking. The study presented here represents the first in-depth investigation of college student NDGs. We addressed the following questions: How do NDGs form? Do NDG members assume specific roles? How are group decisions taken? How do group dynamics affect individuals’ drinking?

Background

Drinking for most young people is a social and group activity (Lange & Voas, 2000). Even while acknowledging their importance, groups have remained largely unstudied within the college drinking literature. There is not even a recognized term for the packs of young people roaming from party to party late at night in and around college campuses. We have proposed to call them natural drinking groups (NDGs) (Lange, Johnson & Reed, 2006).

What is an NDG?

- A collection of two or more people organized to share a social activity centered on drinking who are bonded by friendship or other interpersonal relationships.

How is an NDG different than a party?

- Parties are typically larger than NDGs and may be attended by multiple NDGs or individuals on their own.
- Parties are tied to a location (e.g., a private apartment or dormitory), whereas NDGs may form in one location and move to another or multiple sites.
- Individuals attending a party may not know each other and have no interactions at anytime during the gathering, while NDGs imply some types of interpersonal relationships between each member.

Method

We conducted semi-directed interviews with 30 (50% female; 60% White) college students (18 to 24 years old). Each interviewer conducted 15 interviews with participants of both sexes evenly distributed. The interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed. Each interview lasted from 25 to 97 minutes, averaging 53.56 minutes (SD = 18.13).

Interview structure

- Think of the last time you were in a group of people where someone, not necessarily you, consumed alcohol
- Printed timeline helped organize the progression of the event & record locations, times, and people
- Prompts to themes investigated

Group Characteristics

- Group sizes ranged from dyads to 15 members, most typical: 3-5 individuals
- 2/3 of the groups gathered at parties
- Party sizes: 7-100 people, most typical: 30 people
- Number of locations visited: 1 (half of the groups) to 6 locations
- 2/3 of the groups were mixed gender

Analysis of the Interviews

Below we describe themes that emerged in the interviews.

Group Bonds

Many participants described pre-existing bonds within their NDG:

- School-related bonds (dorms, organizations, or athletic teams)
- Friendship (friends, friends of friends, or childhood friends)
- Idiosyncratic characteristics (look, ethnicity, or personality)

Loraine Devos-Comby, PhD, James E. Lange, PhD, Jason Daniel, MPH, & Kestrel Homer, BA

Alcohol as Social Glue?

- Alcohol did not appear as a factor bonding NDG members, however it was the common denominator of multiple groups at a party: “The scene gets kind of click-y in things like that... but one things that brings people together is getting drunk and there was a lot of that” (P1).
- Not drinking at a party was the factor that would set the individuals apart from the party: “[They] were not really involved so much. They were doing their own thing like I guess may be the alcohol, the factor of the alcohol, that they weren’t [drinking]” (P23).

Social Roles: Planning and Organization

Many of the participants described specific roles members took within their NDG. The first category of roles pertained to the planning and organization of the gathering and included:

- The planner: invites, sets time & location, plans activities
- The “In situ” organizer: organizes activities during the gathering
- The entertainer: keeps the party going
- The leader: makes decisions for the group

Social Roles Facilitating Group Drinking

The second category of roles included functions that facilitated drinking, and included:

- The Host: Just under half of the events described were hosted at someone’s home. The host was often someone who had additional resources for the NDG (ie: backyard, a pool, a beer-pong table, etc). The host sometimes also took the role of leader or planned the event. “Mostly just ‘cause of the backyard and I’m usually the planner in the group, I’m the one who’s like, ‘Are you guys down to have a party this weekend?’ and they’re all like ‘yeah man’ so, I get the money together and ask people to buy us the alcohol.” (when asked how he got his role as host; P5)

- The Alcohol Provider: In events that were hosted at a private house, participants described the role of alcohol provider. This person was often over 21 years old or underage with a fake identification card and conducted it as a business-like activity (ie: collecting money from everyone) and ensured there was an abundance of alcohol.

Social Roles: Group Regulation

- The Group Regulator: The group regulator managed the group’s behavior as it became affected by alcohol. One third of the interviews described a group member taking on this role. The group regulator often was someone close to the host who drank less and acted more responsibly than others. This role was often viewed as a duty.

- The Caregiver: Many participants referred to someone taking a caretaker role. This person took care of a friend who had too much to drink (ex: brought water to drink & held hair while vomiting). The caregiver was someone who didn’t drink, drank less, or tolerated alcohol better. This person appeared as a dedicated friend and was often motivated by the hope for reciprocity should the roles be reversed.

- The Designated Driver: In one third of the interviews participants referenced someone being the designated driver (DD). The majority of them used the concept correctly. The DD abstained from alcohol and agreed to the role ahead of time. The role was often viewed as a duty. The role was assigned using a rotation system or to someone who never drinks. Participants saw the role of designated driver both as a necessity and a role that could outcast them:

“The designated drivers probably didn’t have as much fun. Even though, like, they seemed to be doing their own thing.” (P23) “The big thing is if you’re the DD and you don’t have at least a glass in your hand, you feel out of place.” (P19)

Decision Processes

Decisions were reached within NDGs in three ways:

- The majority of participants described democratic decisions (unanimous decision, compromising, majority votes).
 - Dictatorial decisions (when needed to regulate a NDG member’s behavior, the NDG was waiting for a decision, or when an NDG member was dominating the group).
 - Response to external factors (e.g. when a member could not enter a bar, or scheduling constraints).
- With greater alcohol consumption came more examples of random unplanned behavior that could potentially lead to risky situations (e.g., a group of girls following male strangers into their house to party).

Group Drinking

Half of the sample described events with generalized drunkenness and an abundance of alcohol.

“Most of them were really drunk. We had all kinds of alcohol, there was beer for beer pong there was, you know vodka, probably whiskey, rum, tequila, most things you could want and there was enough for everybody if you wanted it.” (P1)

Drunkenness was sought as a group’s goal.

“There was no other topic or conversation about ‘Oh! Let’s get more alcohol’ or ‘let’s get more wasted’ because we could already tell that most of us were drunk.” (P8)

Drunkenness was described as prototypic of fraternities.

“Everyone wants everyone to be drunk; it’s ‘Who can get really drunk and black out?!’” (P8)

Social Influence to Drink

As any “dissidents” in other social groups, members who did not endorse the norm of heavy drinking were marginalized and subjected to social influence to realign with the majority behavior.

- Peer pressure (one third of the sample)
- Social conformity
- Social comparison

“Any time you’re in a social situation, there’s gonna be alcohol at a college party. Let’s be honest right ...so you’re always gonna have that friend who’s like trying to out-drink you or he’s making fun of you ‘cause you’re drinking slow.” (P14)

Conclusion

A majority of the interviewees told us that the events they described were typical of those they usually experienced. Most NDGs were characterized by some social structure with members taking different social roles. These social roles served various functions facilitating the group and the group’s drinking.

As the NDGs reached drunkenness, decision negotiations were replaced by random actions that often exemplified the loss of judgment that goes with alcohol impairment and led to risky situations.

Understanding group dynamics and social roles in drinking groups could inform prevention efforts by identifying new loci of interventions: promoting pro-social roles such as the designated driver, the caregiver, the host, or the behavior regulator could encourage peers to become effective agents of prevention within the group.

References

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