A DIARY INVESTIGATION ON COLLEGIATE NATURAL DRINKING GROUPS

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Abstract

We conducted a four-week diary investigation on group formation and the processes involved in these groups. Results show that Natural Drinking Groups (NDGs) met repeatedly and were organized around the same key players. A social role structure emerged within groups similar to that evidenced in previous interviews and this structure was stable over time. The findings revealed some consistency in the way groups formed and deconstructed over the course of multiple events. Drinking settings and circumstances played a role in group formation and deconstruction, and in the social roles coming into play. In sum, this study unveils the intricate relationships within NDGs, and how group characteristics and processes are affected during drinking events.

Background

Natural Drinking Groups

College students mostly drink in groups. Yet, little research substantively describes these groups. This study examined the formation, structure and continuity of NDGs and their activities in a longitudinal perspective. Our definition of a NDG is 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 (Lange, Johnson & Reed, 2006).

In a previous study of NDGs (Lange, Devos-Comby, Moore, Daniel, & Homer, under review), we conducted a series of interviews with college students about their drinking groups. These interviews were then analyzed to identify roles, relationships and dynamic group properties. We also investigated how these groups formed and whether status systems appeared to develop within them. We were able to find three main stages for the groups. Within those stages, various roles appeared to take on prominence. Most notable of these roles were: Leaders, Followers, Caregivers, & Alcohol Providers.

Purpose

The present study describes an extension of the previous interview study. This new study increases the number of participants and events and uses a mixed methods approach to further examine the roles discovered in the previous study. Finally, we are able to examine the influence of group level characteristics on individual level drinking.

Method

Survey

This study was conducted over a 1 month period (4 assessments, 1 week apart), plus a mandatory training session prior to the start date. All of the participants started in the same week and reported on a NDG event either in the past 30 days (1st assessment) or the past 7 days (2nd, 3rd, and 4th assessments). Participants were asked to log onto a web-based PLOG (private blog) and answer several open- and close-ended survey items. Completion of all 4 assessments earned the participant $90. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be 18 to 24, enrolled at the university, have consumed alcohol once in the past year and participated in a NDG in the past 30 days.

Coding

- Coded in 3 waves using Atlas.ti.5
- Role variables were converted from open ended responses into count of role occurrence within each group from the 1st two weeks

Sample Characteristics

- 68 of the 71 participants recruited during April of 2009 completed at least one entry
- 44% were female, 44% were white, 32% were seniors, 28% were freshmen
- Mean age was 20 (sd =1.65)
- Mean number of drinks for the participant was 9.6 (sd = 6.3) on their heaviest drinking day in the 30 days prior to the study
- 77% engaged in heavy episodic drinking in the 30 days prior to the study (5 for males/4 for females)

Analysis

We conducted event specific analyses in which each NDG was counted as the unit of analysis (n=261). To examine the group- and individual-level characteristics of each of the NDGs, we conducted two regression analyses with participant reported number of drinks for that event and participant reported intoxication level for that event as the dependent variables.

Next, in an effort to examine the stability of roles across events with the same participant, we coded the presence of 4 roles: Leaders, Followers, Caregivers, and Alcohol Providers. We also did the same for the presence of couples. We compared only weeks 1 and 2 of the diaries. We then used a Chi Square test to determine if the presence of a role in weeks 1 and 2 was more likely to be the same person than a different member of the NDG.

Finally, Chi Square tests were used to test associations between presence of roles and other characteristics of the event.

Results

Predictors of Number of Drinks

A regression model was built using variables that were significantly associated with participant reported number of drinks for that event. The final model included: participant gender, participant age, number of locations visited that night, party type (size), public vs. private event, and percent of the group that drank. The model explained 14% of the variance in participant drinking. Older and male participants drank more than younger and female participants. Also, participants reported drinking more when a larger percentage of group members were drinking and as party size increased (ex. house parties vs. hanging out in the dorm or apartment; see Table 1).

Table 1. Individual and Group Effects on Number of Drinks

	B (S.E.)	Significance
Female vs. Male	-1.758(.633)	.006
Age	-.426(.208)	.041
Number of Locations Visited	.772(.501)	.125
Party Type (1=hanging out, 2 = group level party, 3= larger party)	1.802(.345)	.002
Private vs. Public	-.761(.820)	.355
Percent of Drinkers in the Group	4.154(1.68)	.012

Predictors of Reported Intoxication

A regression model was built using variables that were significantly associated with participant reported intoxication at that event. The final model included: participant gender, participant age, number of locations visited that night, party type, public vs. private event and percent of the group that drank. The model explained 21% of the variance in participant reported intoxication. The results indicate that larger parties and a higher percentage of group drinkers were associated with greater reported intoxication and that a higher mean group age was associated with a lower reported intoxication (see Table 2).

Table 2. Individual and Group Effects on Reported Intoxication

	B (S.E.)	Significance
Female vs. Male	.100(.265)	.706
Age	-.130(.096)	.180
Number of Locations Visited	.263(.398)	.216
Party Type (1=hanging out, 2 = group level party, 3= larger party)	.398(.146)	.007
Private vs. Public	.062(.344)	.856
Percent of Drinkers in the Group	2.403(.690)	.001
Mean Age of the Group	-.136(.051)	.009

Roles

Comparing Weeks 1 and 2

- Leaders
  - Were observed in 49% of the NDGs
  - More likely to be observed in party events (dorm or house) vs. bars or restaurants (p=.004) & in student-only groups vs. mixed groups (p=.05)
  - In groups that have a leader in weeks 1 & 2, the leader from week 1 is significantly more likely to be the leader in week 2 (p<.002) compared to another group member
- Followers
  - Were observed in 47% of the NDGs
  - Groups with leaders are more likely to include followers (p<.001)
  - In groups that have a follower in weeks 1 & 2, the follower from week 1 is significantly more likely to be the follower in week 2 (p=.0522) compared to another group member
- Caregivers
  - Were observed in 15% of the NDGs
  - Less likely in groups that are hanging out vs. larger parties (p=.04)
  - Not observed in any male-only groups
- Alcohol Providers
  - Were observed in 25% of the NDGs
  - More likely at parties vs. bars or restaurants (p<.05)
  - Groups with a younger age participant, were more likely to have an alcohol provider
- Couples
  - Were observed in 38% of the NDGs
  - Although not a role, the presence of a couple influenced many aspects of the group construction (ex. caring for a girlfriend cues more nurturing behavior by a male)

Conclusion

Much of the analyses presented here are descriptive in nature and certainly suffer from the convenience sampling technique used, so their generalizability is not certain. However, since there are so few studies that have described NDGs, it seemed important to include the details of the groups we measured. Cultural, personal and setting factors appear likely to make each NDG somewhat unique. For instance, we find that the presence of couples is predictive of less formal, "hanging out" group drinking. We also see that setting is predictive of roles found within groups, and resulting drinking as well.

In our view, the fact that any investigation of NDGs will be tied to a particular setting and cultural conventions is not a fatal flaw in the construct or the need to investigate it. Indeed, that we could describe relationships between group-level variables, settings and individual behavior is testament to the importance of such investigations. The focus solely on the individual or the setting, or vague discussions of "peers" gloss over important dynamics that are likely affecting drinking decisions. We see, for instance, that male students within male-only NDGs are very unlikely to report a caregiver role. At first blush, this would appear to be a risk factor; however, at this point, we have not demonstrated that the presence of a caregiver is protective. Perhaps knowledge that a potential caregiver is present removes a moderating factor for excessive drinking. Thus, counter intuitively, a caregiver role within the NDG may in fact be a risk factor.

References

Lange, J., Devos-Comby, L., Moore, R., Daniel, J., & Homer, K. (Under Review). Collegiate natural drinking groups: Characteristics, structure and processes.

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