

Natural Drinking Groups & Bystander Behaviors

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Abstract

Most college students tend to drink in small groups. Parties are ever present, but the lever of drinking behaviors may actually reside in the social relationships and dynamics that occur in small natural drinking groups (NDG). Researchers are beginning to look at these groups as loci for harm reduction interventions. An examination of diary entries from a NIH funded study revealed both: instances of bystander behaviors (failure to intervene to reduce harm), and cases of care giving behaviors among drinkers within the NDG. This presentation highlights a set of social roles that were consistently displayed within the NDGs, a lack of intervention on harmful drinking practices, and a denial of responsibility to help those outside of the NDG. Conceptualizing the results within the context of bystander theory can help us to better understand why college students may or may not help their peers in harmful drinking contexts and inform future interventions.

Background

Alcohol is widely recognized as the leading cause of negative consequences within the college-aged population. While abundant research has been done to uncover the basic determinants of drinking behaviors, little attention has been paid to the group nature of college drinking. Our research team has initiated a thorough investigation on the formation, structure and continuity of NDGs and their activities, combining both qualitative (interview and diary studies) and quantitative (field survey) methods.

Natural Drinking Groups

We define a Natural Drinking Group (NDG) as 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.

Bystander Theory

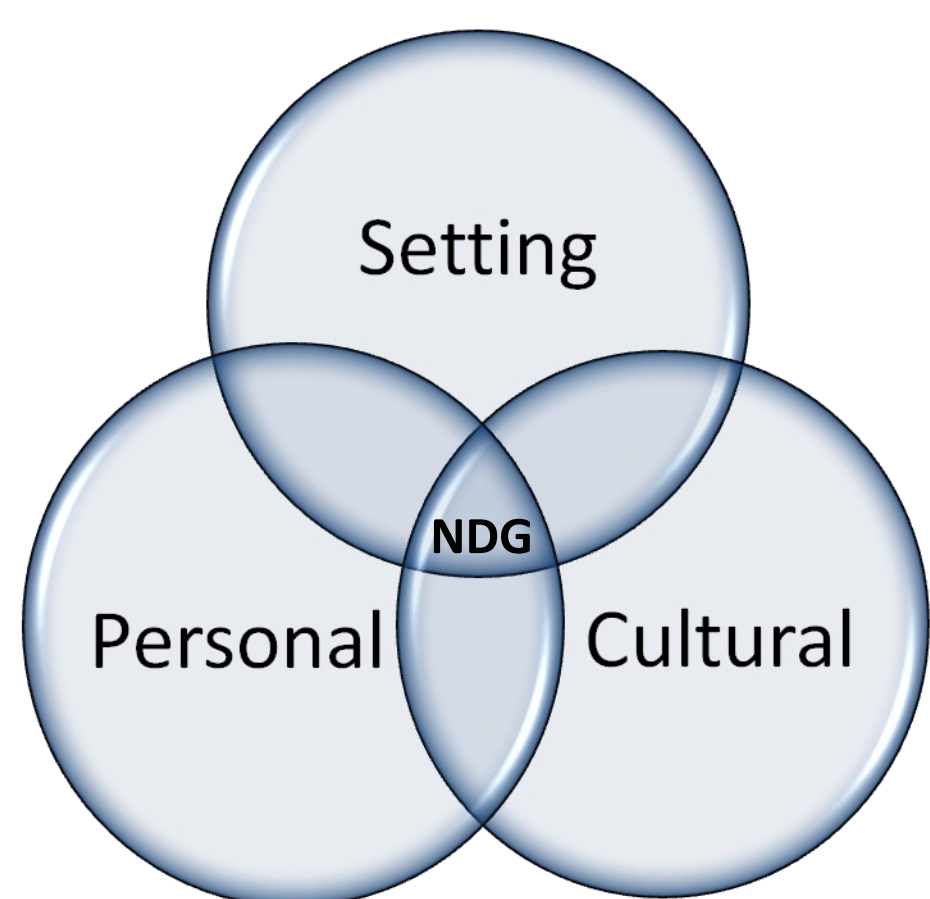
The bystander effect is a theory that explains why people do not intervene in problematic situations and encourages pro-social behaviors, or behaviors that work towards promoting socially responsible individuals.

This theory relies heavily on the influence and prominence of leaders and followers within group settings, the concepts of pluralistic ignorance (the idea that if no one acknowledges the emergency it must not be serious), and diffusion of responsibility (assuming that someone else will intervene).

Purpose

Diary narratives from student drinkers collected online weekly over a month were examined for specific behaviors consistent with 1) a bystander effect, 2) care giving.

Figure 1. Primary Factors in NDG Formation.



Method

Diaries

Participants reported on their participation in an event where alcohol was shared that occurred 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. 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.

Figure 2. Sample Characteristics.

Participation	• 68/71 participants recruited during April of 2009 completed at least one entry
Gender	• 44% Female • 66% Male
Ethnicity	• 44% White • 66% Other
Class Level	• 28% Freshman • 32% Seniors • 40% Sophomores and Juniors
Age	• Mean = 20 years old • SD = 1.65
Drinking Behavior	• 77% engaged in heavy episodic drinking in the 30 days prior to the study (5 for males/4 for females)

Results

The results showed that socio-cultural, personal and setting factors make each NDG somewhat unique. However, within these unique groups several characteristics and behaviors appeared to be consistent. Most typically, group members had a particular bond existing prior to the gathering. The groups were most often cohesive and were organized around specific social roles. The setting was predictive of the roles found within each group and of drinking as well.

Social Roles

Leaders

- More likely in party events (dorm or house) vs. bars/restaurants (p=.004) & in student-only groups vs. mixed groups (p=.05)
- In groups that have a leader in two consecutive weeks, the leader was significantly more likely to be the same person in both weeks than not (p<.002)

Followers

- Groups with leaders are more likely to include followers (p<.001)
- In groups that have a follower in two consecutive weeks, the follower was significantly more likely to be the same person in both weeks than not (p=.05)

Caregivers

- Less likely in small groups that are hanging out vs. larger parties (p=.04)
- Not observed in any male-only groups

Alcohol Providers

- 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

- The presence of a couple influenced many aspects of the group dynamics
- For instance: A girlfriend experiencing acute intoxication would trigger care giving in the boyfriend, a behavior typically not endorsed by men in other drinking contexts

Bystander Effect vs. Care Giving

Leaders & Followers

According to the bystander effect theory, leaders and followers play key roles in the decision to intervene in a problematic situation or not. If the leader believes there is no problem, a follower will likely take on that belief. The data showed that both roles were prominent within the NDGs. and this may directly contribute to whether or not an individual would intervene in a problematic situation.

“I was kind of the leader of the group. Since I was driving, I got to choose when we came and went, and I pulled all of the members of our group together. I like being in this position rather than at the mercy of another person making the decisions.”

Caregivers

The Caregiver was seen in many NDG’s, and was a female in all circumstances excluding those of caregiving in the case of couples. The Caregiver takes care of individuals who are sick or in need of help due to alcohol consumption or situational problems. Although this is the type of pro-social behavior desired from college-aged students, the intervention only occurred after the harmful drinking practices had been carried out and did not extend to individuals who were not in the NDG.

“It made me feel like I was a good friend ‘cause I know if that happened to me, I’d want someone to be there helping me out.”

Diffusion of Responsibility

According to the bystander effect theory, diffusion of responsibility accounts for the lack of intervention among a group faced with a problematic situation. Due to the presence of strong bonds or pre-existing relationships among members of NDGs, responsibility for individuals outside of the group was extremely low or absent all together. Caregivers stated feelings of obligation to intervene and care for members of their NDGs; however the low presence of this role (despite heavy drunkenness in many groups) suggests that diffusion of responsibility may play a role also within NDGs. Therefore, it may be concluded that many students feel that the individual in need will be taken care by others (within or outside their NDGs), relieving them of responsibility.

Pluralistic Ignorance

The larger the event size was, the more alcohol was consumed in the NDG (p <.002). Based on this finding, the students may likely be misinterpreting or incorrectly identifying dangerous or problematic situations as harmless because generalized drunkenness appears both normal and trivial. This concept can also help to explain why there are students who don’t intervene to prevent dangerous drinking situations from occurring. (For example, if an individual’s friend says he plans to drink and drive, and no members of the group voice concern, the individual is less likely to speak out, even if they believe the situation to be problematic.)

“Oh, um, y’know people got sick no one was ug, surprised, no one was paying attention you see someone throwing up, or passing out, yeah it doesn’t [seem] particularly concerning...because it is so common.”



Implications

This research has allowed us to understand that judgment and moral behavior are affected not only by alcohol consumption but also by the social roles and circumstances that occur within NDGs. The bystander effect also comes into play in these situations, compounding the likelihood for dangerous, urgent or problematic occurrences.

Contextualizing NDG’s within a bystander framework can help to understand why students are intervening in some situations and not others. Having this understanding affords the opportunity to target the student drinking practices before they occur, but also to educate students about the dynamics of social drinking situations and to train them to intervene earlier and more often.

Figure 3. Major Roles in NDGs and Implications for Bystander Effect.

Social Role	Definition	% NDGs	Implication
Leader	Makes decisions	49%	If failing to acknowledge a problematic situation, a leader could influence others to be inactive bystanders. The leader also has the ability to prompt other members of the NDG to intervene.
Follower	Goes with the decisions	47%	A follower mimics the behavior of the leader as well as the group majority, therefore not likely to intervene unless encouraged by others.
Caregiver	Helps the sick ones	15%	A caregiver is the best example of a bystander who chooses to intervene. They will step-up in problematic and dangerous situations and seek help for others.
Alcohol Provider	Brings alcohol to the group	25%	An alcohol provider enables dangerous drinking behaviors. Capable of intervening in alcohol consumption by monitoring alcohol allocation.
Couples	Have pre-existing romantic relationship	38%	Couples oftentimes act as caregivers to their significant others. Only in this role did men display intervention behaviors.

Educational Programming Recommendations

It is suggested that a Bystander Intervention Training Program be encouraged in order to combat the unsafe drinking practices of students. It is recommended that this training include a basic explanation of NDGs and the common social roles exhibited within these groups. The optimal training would be composed of knowledge acquisition that includes understanding of both NDGs and bystander theory, a skill development component, and training on how to recognize problematic situations.

Students should be applauded for the pro-social roles they currently play within their NDGs, while encouraged to intervene earlier, before dangerous drinking behaviors occur (i.e. if they hear their friends planning to mix drugs and alcohol, they can warn them about the dangers associated with this behavior and attempt to stop them), and to extend their interventions to the community at large. By arming students with information, applicable skills, and the ability to identify what circumstances call for intervention, an increase in bystander intervening should ensue.

Acknowledgements

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