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Hosting Non-University Guests and Party-Related Drinking Behaviors of College Students

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Abstract

Background—Hosting non-university guests is common among college students, especially during sports and traditional party weekends. However, the effect of non-university guests - a common social reference group - on host-students' drinking behaviors is not well understood.

Method—Data was drawn from a cross-sectional survey conducted at a public Midwestern university (N=2,951; Mage=20 years) from 2005-2007. Results: Participants who hosted non-university guests tended to be younger in age, male, of white racial background, members of athletic teams, had younger ages of drinking onset, and were more likely to reside off-campus as compared to non-hosts. Host-students also had significantly elevated risk for engaging in heavy party-related drinking while hosting non-university guests, and were more likely to report similar risky drinking behaviors among other party-attendees. Conclusions: Preliminary evidence from this study suggests that college-based prevention efforts would benefit from specifically targeting students who are more likely to host non-university guests.

Keywords

Hosting guests; college students; party-related drinking; peer influences

Despite efforts to curtail alcohol misuse on US college campuses, high-risk drinking among students continues to remain a major public health concern. Recent estimates from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) indicate that the rate of binge drinking (i.e. consuming approximately 5 or more drinks for males and 4 or more drinks for females in a period of 2 hours, resulting in blood alcohol concentration of 0.08 g/dL) has risen from 41.7% in 1998 to 44.7% in 2005 among 18 – 24 year old college students. This has been accompanied by a 9% proportional increase in the incidence of drunk driving and a 3% increase in alcohol related unintentional deaths (Hingson, Zha & Weitzman, 2009). There are also steep individual and social costs associated with alcohol misuse among college students (Harford, Wechsler & Muthen, 2003; O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Wechsler et al., 2002), including but not limited to cognitive impairments (Spear, 2002; Zeigler et al.,

2005), reduced academic performance, involvement in risky sexual behaviors, drug abuse, violence, and vandalism (Cooper, 2002; Harford et al., 2003; Perkins, 2002; Wolaver, 2002).

College settings provide social contexts where heavy drinking is not only common but at times also rewarded by peer approval (Lee, Geisner, Lewis, Neighbors & Larimer, 2007; Sharp & Getz, 1996). Peer drinking norms, both observed and perceived, can be a powerful influence on college students' drinking behaviors (Borsari & Carey, 2001). College students often tend to overestimate their peers' drinking behaviors, resulting in heavier drinking on their part. Further, the effects of actual and perceived drinking norms can vary based on student characteristics like gender, academic rank, and social group settings like membership in athletic teams or Greek organizations (Dams-O'Connor, Martin, & Martens, 2007; Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004; Pedersen, Neighbors, & LaBrie, 2010).

An important consideration in studying the influence of peer drinking norms is identifying the peer "reference group" on whom these norms are based. Most studies on college drinking have focused on a narrow definition of this reference group by only including peers who attend the same university. Same-university peers are undoubtedly an important reference group given their participatory role in shaping campus drinking norms (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005). For many undergraduates, however, an additional social reference group comprises of non-university guests (i.e., peers not studying at the same university who stay over at the host-student's residence, typically on weekends). Surprisingly, very little is known about the influence of this social reference group on the drinking behaviors of college students.

Arguably, non-university guests (i.e. guests not studying at the same university campus) tend to be less well-informed about the student-drinking norms at a particular university, as compared to their peers studying at the same institution. They are also more likely to be viewed as "outsiders" by college students (other than the students who invited them) at social gatherings like college parties. The presence of non-university guests can therefore result in a greater likelihood of risky drinking at such events, fueled by misperceived drinking norms (Leary et al., 1994). Indeed, research finds that the presence of non-university guests at social gatherings is perceived by many students to be associated with heavy drinking and riotous behaviors (Neighbors et al., 2007; Ruddell, Thomas, & Way, 2005).

On the other hand, it is also possible that host-students take their guests to larger parties where heavy drinking is more likely to occur in order to show them a good time. In this scenario, the presence of non-university guests is likely to influence student drinking behaviors more in line with the peer deviancy training model (Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999), where a friendship network can help maintain and increase problem behaviors.

Therefore, the present study sought to better understand the influence of non-university guests on party-related drinking behaviors of college students, especially among host-students. To that end, we first identified background characteristics that helped us distinguish students who hosted non-university guests from those who did not. Next, we

examined if host-students were more likely to engage in heavier party-related drinking while hosting non-university guests, as compared to the non-hosts. Finally, based on retrospective reports of hosts and non-hosts, we evaluated if there was a difference in the drinking behaviors of other party-attendees at the largest party attended by hosts and non-hosts. We expected host-students to engage in heavier drinking as compared to non-hosts and to report similar risky behaviors among other attendees at the largest party they attended while hosting non-university guests.

Method

Data and Sampling Procedures

The sample was taken from a multi-year, cross-sectional study of drinking behaviors conducted on a large Midwestern university campus. Students who were 18 years of age or older were invited to respond to an online survey. The study was conducted in eight waves over two academic years, from 2005 to 2007. The waves corresponded with two weekends each in fall and spring quarters targeted because of their potential as a high-risk and a low-risk period of excessive drinking and celebratory riotous behavior. The risk status of each weekend was determined by the presence or absence of factors that had been associated with high risk drinking and riotous party behavior over a 10 year period on the selected campus (e.g., home football game, traditional sports rival, traditional student block party weekend). Details about the survey construction and procedure have been reported earlier (Durant et al., 2008). All study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Whether or not students hosted non-university guests was assessed only during the last six waves of the survey. As a consequence, data from last six of the eight waves was analyzed for the present study, resulting in a total sample size of $N = 2,951$ (Mean age = 20 ± 2.18 years, 48.5% females). Sample descriptives by year in school and weekend risk-status are provided in Table 1. Nearly one-third (36%) of our sample reported hosting non-university guests, with a greater proportion of students hosting on high-risk than low-risk weekends (38.6% vs. 33.5%). Of those who hosted non-university guests, 93% reported that their guests were less than 21 years of age, while 13% reported that their guests were high-school students.

Variable Coding and Analysis Plan

The influence of hosting non-university guests was assessed separately for the following three outcomes - (1) total number of drinks consumed by the host-student, (2) drinking-related risky/unwanted behaviors (e.g., vandalism, drunk driving) engaged in by the host-student, and (3) heavy drinking and drinking-related risky/unwanted behaviors observed among other party-attendees. All outcomes were assessed in relation to the largest party attended by the respondents (hosts and non-hosts) during the three days (Thursday - Saturday) preceding the survey administration. The presence of non-university guests was also assessed for the same time period.

‘Total number of drinks’ was assessed using two items that asked respondents about (1) the total number of drinks consumed *at* the party, and (2) the total number of drinks consumed *before* the party. The scores on these two variables were summed to get a cumulative score of total number of drinks consumed on the day of the party. The mean number of drinks reported by the sample was 9.60 ($SD = 6.41$).

For the outcome ‘Engaged in drinking-related risky/unwanted behaviors’, an index was created by averaging the responses on nine dummy-coded variables, assessing involvement in verbal arguments, public urination, flashing or mooning, vandalism to the party location, vandalism to the neighboring properties, spontaneous party-related riot, physical fight, driving after drinking, and riding with someone else who had been drinking. Scores on this variable ranged from 0 to 1.

‘Observed heavy drinking and related risky/unwanted behaviors’ at the party was coded in a similar way by averaging participant responses to eight dummy-coded variables, assessing observation of the following behaviors among other attendees at the largest party attended in the three days prior to the survey: heavy drinking, verbal arguments, physical assault, public urination, flashing or mooning, unwanted sexual advances, vandalism, and spontaneous party-related riot. Scores on this variable ranged from 0 to 1.

The main predictor variable included in all models was a dummy coded host-status variable, coded 1 for respondents who reported hosting non-university peers, 0 otherwise. Majority of the host-students (80%) reported taking their guests with them to the largest party they attended during the weekend preceding the survey administration. We first analyzed our models including data from the non-hosts and only those host-students who were accompanied by their guests to the largest party they attended (i.e. 80% of the host-student sub-sample). Next, we re-analyzed our models using the full sample. Since the same pattern of findings was observed in both cases, we report results using the full sample ($n = 2,951$).

The following covariates were included in the models because of their potential association with college students party-related drinking behaviors – age, gender, race-ethnicity, parents level of education (as an indicator of household socio-economic status), year in school, involvement in athletic teams (Brenner & Swanik, 2007), residence location (on-/off-campus) (Harford, Wechsler & Muthen, 2003), party-location (on-/off-campus) (Paschall & Saltz, 2007), and risk status of the weekend (high vs. low) (Champion et al., 2009). The potential moderating effect of the following contextual variables – students' residence location, party-location and weekend risk-status, was also examined by means of two-way interactions. All covariates were added in the first step of the model building process, followed by the key predictor variables. Finally, the interaction terms were added to the models. All analyses were conducted using robust estimation procedures in STATA 11.0.

Results

Students who reported hosting non-university guests were more likely to be younger in age [OR (95% CI) = 0.96 (0.93, 0.99)]; males [$\chi^2(1) = 8.44, p < 0.01$]; of white racial background [$\chi^2(3) = 11.8, p < 0.01$]; members of athletic teams [$\chi^2(1) = 9.51, p < 0.01$];

younger in age at the time of their first drink [OR (95% CI) = 0.95 (0.92, 0.98)]; and reside off-campus [$\chi^2(1) = 30.38, p < 0.001$] as compared to their non-hosting peers.

Output from multiple linear regression analyses revealed that host-students consumed significantly greater number of total drinks, both before and during the party, as compared to their peers who were not hosting, B (SE) = 0.65 (0.26), $p < 0.05$ (see Table 2). This effect remained significant even after accounting for the influence of other salient risk-factors such as party location, year in school, age at first drink, athletic team membership. There was no moderating effect of students' residence location, party location, or weekend risk-status on the association between hosting non-university guests and party-related drinking behaviors of host-students.

A similar trend was observed for our second outcome of 'engaging in drinking-related risky/unwanted behaviors'. Host-students reported marginally higher levels of involvement in drinking-related problem behaviors, such as drunk driving and vandalism than non-hosts, B (SE) = 0.01 (0.004), $p < .08$, but this effect failed to reach significance at $p < .05$. The moderating effect of residence location, party location, and weekend risk-status was examined and found to be non-significant.

Finally, for our third outcome variable, we found that host-students reported observing significantly greater rates of heavy drinking and risky/unwanted behaviors among other party-attendees, as compared to non-hosts, B (SE) = 0.02 (0.01), $p < 0.05$. Two-way interactions between host-status and residence location, party location, and weekend risk-status were examined and found to be non-significant.

Discussion

Alcohol is frequently used by college students to create a desirable image of themselves among their peers and as a means to gain peer acceptance. Although the influence of peers studying at the same university campus has been previously assessed in relation to party-related drinking behaviors of college students (Lee et al., 2007; Perkins et al., 2005), the impact of non-university guests as a social reference group has not been examined before. The present study analyzed survey data from 2,951 undergraduate students enrolled in a large Midwestern university to determine whether hosting non-university guests was associated with high-risk drinking at college parties, especially among the host-students.

More than one-third of our sample reported hosting non-university guests, underscoring the need to better understand the influence of this social reference group on college students' drinking behaviors. Students who hosted non-university guests were more likely to engage in heavy drinking and observe similar risky behaviors among other party attendees. This effect remained significant even after controlling for several important risk factors like age at first drink, athletic team membership, residence and party location, and weekend risk-status. Further, party-related drinking behaviors of host-students did not vary based on their residence location (on/off-campus), party location (on/off-campus) or risk-status of the weekend (high vs. low), suggesting that hosting non-university guests is a more general risk factor whose effect is not moderated by these contextual variables. Host-students also

reported greater drinking and related risky/unwanted behaviors among other party attendees. Although it is difficult to ascertain the actual mechanisms of this effect given the limitations of our data, we hypothesize that this may be either due to misperceived drinking norms resulting from the presence of unfamiliar peers, or a negative peer dynamic stemming from the hosts decision to take their guests to parties where heavier drinking was more likely. Taken together, our findings add to the cumulative body of evidence regarding peer influences on college drinking behaviors by identifying hosting non-university guests as a salient risk-factor associated with heavy drinking at college parties.

Limitations

Although we did not have detailed information about the typical drinking behaviors of our study participants, we did control for their age at first drink, which is considered to be a robust predictor of drinking behaviors during adolescence and early adulthood (Grant, Stinson & Harford, 2001). Further, limited information was available about the personality characteristics of host-students, which could operate as “third variables” and influence both their party-related drinking and likelihood of hosting non-university guests. Finally, like most other studies of students drinking behaviors, our sole reliance on self-report data can be viewed as a potential weakness.

Conclusions and Implications

To the extent that present findings are replicated in future research, the increased risk of party-related drinking associated with hosting non-university guests has implications for college policymakers and campus public safety officials. College administrators rightfully anticipate an increase of high-risk drinking on “celebratory” weekends such as sports events against traditional rivals, championship games, and local or national holidays linked with heavy drinking. Research studies also find an increased rate of risky drinking at such events (Champion et al., 2009). Our findings suggest that hosting non-university guests creates an added level of risk for the host-students. More importantly, this risk is not limited to traditional “hard partying” weekends, as hosting non-university guests was associated with heavy drinking across both high and low risk weekends. This presents an additional challenge for college administrators working to alter risk behavior on their campuses given the weekend presence of large numbers of young adults on a university's campus who have not been exposed to whatever prevention programs the university has in place.

It is possible, though perhaps not politically expedient, for administrators to structure policies that inhibit hosting non-university peers, especially for students living on-campus. Given that we did not find any significant variations in the influence of hosting non-university guests based on the student's year in school, such policies would not need to target students in a particular academic rank (e.g., freshmen), although administrators obviously have greater control over on-campus housing practices. Administrators can also make it clear that they will notify officials at a guest's school if a visiting student is involved in alcohol infractions. At the same time, college and university alcohol policies can extend the student code of conduct to student behavior at other campuses with the goal of discouraging risky behavior that results from thinking that underage drinking or public intoxication has fewer consequences when practiced away from “home.”

Although recent research has produced conflicting findings regarding the effectiveness of social norms campaigns, particularly in areas of high alcohol outlet density (DeJong et al., 2009), our findings may inform similar efforts that are designed to reduce college students' alcohol use behaviors (DeJong et al., 2006; Turner, Perkins, & Bauerle, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2003). The basic premise of this approach is that students often overestimate the use and approval of alcohol by their peers, and thus correcting misperceptions regarding peers alcohol use will result in a reduction of a student's own alcohol use. Typically, the statistics used in college social norms campaigns are based on drinking attitudes and practices of students enrolled on the same campus. Present findings suggest that students tend to engage in higher-risk drinking even when in the company of peers not studying on the same campus, thus indicating another area for social norms research regarding campus norms for showing guests a "good time." Although not addressed by this study, it is conceivable that the overestimations are reciprocal, that is, guests also overestimate drinking norms at the campus that they are visiting. Alternatively, it is possible that heavy drinking and related risky behaviors exhibited by non-university guests and their hosts may in fact be based on a *correct* perception of norms within a friendship network and may represent an intentionality that is better addressed through environmental control efforts rather than norms campaigns. Future research that examines college students' perceptions and risk behaviors when they are visiting friends at another campus may help answer this question.

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Bivariate comparisons based on student's year in school and risk status of the weekend (Total N = 2,951).

Table 1

Variable Names	Year in School				Weekend Risk Status	
	Freshmen (n=959)	Sophomore (n=797)	Junior (n=655)	Senior (n=540)	Low Risk (n=1,366)	High Risk (n=1,585)
Hosted non-university guests	37.3%	35.8%	36.3%	34.8%	33.5%	38.6%
Residence Location (off-campus)	5.0%	64.9%	87.0%	94.4%	54.1%	57.2%
Athletic Participation	38.8%	36.0%	39.5%	34.0%	36.7%	37.8%
Location of party (off-campus)	81.2%	85.0%	85.9%	85.8%	83.1%	85.1%
<i>Party Related Behaviors Mean (SD)</i>						
Total number of drinks consumed	8.88 (6.17)	9.76 (6.86)	9.79 (6.17)	10.07 (6.19)	9.63 (6.37)	9.45 (6.38)
Engaged in drinking related risky behaviors	0.03 (0.11)	0.04 (0.09)	0.04 (0.11)	0.05 (0.12)	0.03 (0.08)	0.04 (0.12)
Observed heavy drinking and related risky behaviors	0.22 (0.18)	0.23 (0.19)	0.22 (0.20)	0.19 (0.19)	0.21 (0.17)	0.22 (0.20)

Table 2

Multiple regression output for the three outcome variables

Key Predictor Variable	Outcome variables			P value
	Total number of drinks consumed (Range: 2 – 32)	Engaged in drinking-related risky behaviors (Range: 0 -1)	Observed heavy drinking and related risky behaviors (Range: 0 -1)	
<i>Hosting non-university guests</i>	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	P value
<i>Covariates</i>				
Gender (Male)	.65(.26)	.01(.004)	.02(.01)	<.05
Race: Black	3.39(.25)	.03(.004)	.02(.01)	<.05
Asian American	-3.25(.60)	.01(.01)	.06(.02)	<.01
Others	-.86(.56)	.01(.01)	-.01(.02)	n.s.
Age	-.004(.68)	.02(.01)	.02(.02)	n.s.
Age at first drink	.17(.11)	.004(.001)	-.004(.003)	n.s.
Year in School: Junior	-.67(.07)	-.01(.001)	-.01(.001)	<.001
Sophomore	.24(.38)	.002(.01)	.02(.01)	<.08
Freshman	.87(.44)	.01(.001)	.05(.01)	<.001
Parent Education: 4yr college	1.01(.59)	.01(.01)	.05(.02)	<.01
Beyond 4yr college	-.46(.32)	-.01(.01)	-.03(.01)	<.01
Athletic Team Membership	-.53(.31)	-.01(.01)	-.02(.01)	<.05
Off-campus residence	.85(.26)	.004(.004)	.04(.01)	<.001
Off-campus party	1.15(.40)	.01(.01)	.02(.01)	<.08
Weekend Risk Status (High)	-.19(.35)	-.003(.01)	.02(.01)	<.08
	-.24(.25)	.04(.004)	.02(.01)	<.05

Note. Omitted reference categories: Gender (female), Race (non-Hispanic Whites), Year in school (5th yr undergrads & seniors), Parent education level (Less than 4 yr college degree).