Published in final edited form as:

J Drug Educ. 2017 ; 47(3-4): 87–107. doi:10.1177/0047237918790550.

Focus Group Discussions with Bar and Restaurant Management and Staff Regarding Responsible Alcohol Beverage Service

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Abstract

Staff and management of bars and restaurants are the key players in assuring responsible beverage service (RBS) and preventing the over service of alcohol to intoxicated patrons. We conducted six focus group discussions (N=42) with management and staff from bars and restaurants about responsible beverage service (RBS). We compared findings from these current discussions to results of focus group discussions conducted in the 1990's. In comparison to the earlier focus group discussions, we found that many managers and staff members had experience with RBS training programs, establishments generally had written alcohol service policies, and managers and staff members perceived greater likelihood of facing consequences from law enforcement for serving underage youth. Managers and servers also expressed greater concern about over service of alcohol, but did not report greater concern about potential legal consequences for over service of alcohol than participants from the 1990's focus groups. Results of this study can inform training and enforcement approaches to addressing over service of alcohol.

Background

Alcohol contributes to a number of public health problems, including motor vehicle crashes, assault, suicide, and chronic disease (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Hayward, Zubrick, & Silburn, 1992; Macinko, Silver, & Bae, 2015; Scott, Schafer, & Greenfield, 1999). An effective way to reduce these alcohol-related problems is to decrease rates of excessive alcohol use (Babor et al., 2010). To decrease excessive alcohol use, we can change the environment that encourages heavier alcohol use through strategies such as promoting responsible alcohol service. Responsible alcohol service means slowing service of alcohol to prevent customers from getting intoxicated and not over serving customers (i.e., not serving or selling to customers who are obviously intoxicated). Over service of alcohol directly contributes to excessive alcohol consumption (Graham & Wells, 2001; O'Donnell, 1985; Thombs et al., 2008; Naimi et al., 2009).

Sales to obviously intoxicated persons are prohibited by law in 47 states (Aiello, 1998; Mosher et al., 2009). Despite these laws, the likelihood of over service of alcohol has remained high over the past few decades. Estimates of the likelihood of sales to obviously intoxicated patrons at bars and restaurants in the U.S. range from 58% to 83% (Freisthler et al., 2003; Lenk et al., 2006; McKnight & Streff, 1994; Toomey et al., 1999; 2004; 2016) with the most recent estimate being 82% (Toomey et al., 2016).

Different types of intervention approaches have been used to address over service of alcohol, but the feasibility and level of research support varies across approaches. For example, law enforcement approaches to reducing sales to obviously intoxication patrons have very limited research support (Rammohan et al., 2011). Research does support the effectiveness of compliance checks by law enforcement for reducing sales to *underage* patrons (i.e., underage youth attempt to purchase alcohol under the supervision of law enforcement; if an illegal alcohol sale is made, a penalty is applied to the server and/or the manager) (Elder et al., 2007; Wagenaar et al., 2005), but a comparable enforcement approach is not feasible to prevent sales to intoxicated patrons. Over service enforcement efforts, such as monitoring establishments for over service of alcohol, may require significantly more resources than compliance checks, limiting feasibility.

Another approach is dram shop civil liability, which allows licensed alcohol establishments to be held liable for over serving an obviously intoxicated person who causes injury or death as a result of their intoxication. Dram shop liability can reduce alcohol-related problems such as motor vehicle fatalities (Rammohan et al., 2011). However, effects of dram shop liability may be diminished by statutes of limitations, restrictions on monetary caps, and evidentiary requirements (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013).

Responsible beverage service (RBS) training is a third approach that is commonly used to address over service of alcohol. RBS training programs have historically focused on training alcohol servers (Buka & Birdthistle, 1999; Holder & Wagenaar, 1994; Russ & Geller, 1987; Saltz, 1987). However, training servers alone has had little effect on over service of alcohol (Buka & Birdthistle, 1999; Johnson & Berglund, 2009; Lang et al., 1998) or alcohol-related problems (Trolldal et al., 2013). Training only servers ignores the environment in which servers work, including the role of managers. Management sets expectations for how alcohol is served within an establishment. Involving managers in promoting responsible service practices is a promising approach. However, effects of current manager training programs may also be limited when used by themselves (Toomey et al., 2008).

Assessing the attitudes, perceptions, practices, and environmental factors of many types of establishment employees regarding responsible alcohol service may inform future RBS training programs. In the late 1990's, a research team from the Alcohol Epidemiology Program at the University of Minnesota conducted focus groups with alcohol servers, bartenders, security staff, owners, and managers from bars and restaurants (Gehan et al., 1999). Results from these focus group discussions informed development of the Alcohol Risk Management (ARM™) and Enhanced Alcohol Risk Management (eARM™) programs (Toomey et al., 2008; 2017). These are intensive management training programs that promote development of responsible beverage service policies for bars and restaurants. The

development of these training programs, and the focus group questions used in the Gehan et al. study, were guided by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). Focus group discussions focused on the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors that may affect responsible alcohol service. Examples of personal factors were: staff and managers' knowledge about alcohol control laws, perceptions of potential liability, attitudes toward cutting off alcohol service, experience with training programs, and perceptions of and expectancies that policies and/or laws will be enforced by managers. Discussions about behavioral factors focused on managers' ability to implement establishment policies, and staff members' ability to cut off service and experience with refusing to serve alcohol. Finally, there were also discussions about environmental factors that can influence alcohol sales including managers creating establishment-specific alcohol service policies and backing up staff members as well as the legal, liability, and enforcement environments.

Results from the Gehan et al. (1999) study showed that service staff members were hesitant to cut off customers because of fear of losing tips or a customer becoming angry. Staff reported varying levels of support from management; some stated that their decision to cut off a customer would be backed up by management, while others reported that they would be fired if they cut off alcohol service. Many also indicated that their managers did not want to or know how to deal with problems related to intoxicated patrons. Staff supported the idea of having written policies to promote responsible alcohol service in their establishment. Notable findings from discussions with the owners and managers were that: (1) none had received formal management training, (2) few reported having written establishment policies setting expectations for responsible alcohol service, (3) they were confused about state laws regarding the service of alcohol, and (4) they left decisions about cutting off intoxicated customers to individual servers but most did not report consistently backing up these decisions. Although they reported few consequences for over service of alcohol from law enforcement, most expressed fear of being sued for over service of alcohol under the state's dram shop law. Most managers did not want to take responsibility for their staff's alcohol service. Gehan et al. (1999) reported findings from focus group discussions that occurred almost two decades ago. The state of the hospitality industry may be very different today—and thus responsible beverage service training programs such as the ARM and eARM programs may need to be updated. Building directly on the Gehan et al., (1999) study, we conducted a new series of focus group discussions with owners, managers, and staff from bars and restaurants to assess changes in the personal, behavioral, and environmental factors since the previous focus group discussions. Findings from this study could inform the need for new or adaptations to existing RBS training programs as well as other approaches to reducing over service of alcohol.

Methods

Focus group discussions were conducted as part of larger evaluation of the eARM program. The eARM program was designed for general managers of bars and restaurants to encourage them to adopt and implement establishment policies that promote responsible beverage service—including not over serving alcohol (Toomey et al., 2017).

Participants

A convenience sample of service industry personnel were recruited from the Minneapolis-St. Paul (MN) metropolitan area in 2014 to participate in focus group discussions about their profession. Participants were recruited using: (1) direct contacts from establishments participating in an evaluation of the eARM program, (2) local print advertising and (3) local online advertising. Inclusion criteria were being currently employed at a bar or restaurant and being at least 21 years of age. We formed separate focus groups based on professional role: owners and managers (referred to only as “managers” throughout the rest of this paper), servers and bartenders, and security.

We formed these separate groups to replicate what Gehan et al. (1999) had done twenty years previously and to more fully understand the different issues each group may face with over service of alcohol. For example, do managers have confidence they can implement policies vs. do staff members perceive that management supports their decision to cut off alcohol service. We also wanted to create an environment where participants could be comfortable giving candid responses; staff members might not have wanted to say anything negative if managers were present.

Participants were paid with a \$50 gift card and a free meal as an incentive. Forty-two people participated in the focus group discussions—two discussion groups with managers (5 and 7 participants per group); three discussion groups with servers and bartenders (7, 9, and 12 participants per group); and one discussion group with security staff (3 participants). Although some of the focus groups had a small number of participants, we felt they still provided important insight and information, and thus, included data from these discussions in our analyses. Data from similarly sized focus groups have been previously published (e.g., Horvath et al., 2016).

Procedures

All study procedures were approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board. Focus group discussions were conducted in a private room at the University of Minnesota. At least two research staff members were present for each focus group, one acting as facilitator and the other as observer. Facilitators were public health professionals trained in focus group design and implementation. Authors AME and SLH were facilitators, and DME was an observer. Consent was obtained and incentives were paid prior to the start of each focus group. All focus groups were digitally recorded and lasted from 45-90 minutes. Audio recordings were professionally transcribed by an external vendor.

Participants also completed a written demographic survey. Questions on this survey included sex, age, race, ethnicity, professional job title, number of years of experience in the service industry, and an indication whether they participated in the eARM program.

Focus Group Questions

We asked the same questions that were asked by Gehan and associates (1999) in the previous focus group discussions. Discussion topics focused on experience with RBS training, knowledge of and use of establishment-level policies, knowledge of laws,

perceptions of potential liability, experiences with refusing to serve obviously intoxicated customers, and servers' experience with management regarding responsible alcohol service. We added questions regarding perceptions of local law enforcement and changes over time (broadly not specific time periods) in the alcohol service industry. While many questions were consistent across all of the focus groups, some were tailored to gather information specific to each professional role. Open-ended questions and prompts were based on standard procedures for question development (Krueger, 2000).

Data Analysis

The guiding framework for data analysis was the Constant Comparative Method from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Charmaz, 2014). Two of the study authors first used line-by-line open coding (Glaser, 1998). One complete utterance was considered the unit of analysis, and codes varied in length from a short sentence to many sentences. The two coders chose one initial transcript (Managers 1) and independently created a list of codes and definitions. They met to discuss overlapping codes and definitions and determined the content of the codebook. A Constant Comparative Method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), or Grounded Theory Method, was used to examine and reexamine statements from the focus groups with coders going through an iterative process to better understand the data. A second transcript (Servers 1) was analyzed using the mutually agreed upon codes and definitions. Then coders met again to determine if changes were required to the codebook. Twenty codes were identified. All remaining transcripts were coded independently. Codes were recorded in Excel (Microsoft Corporation, 2015) with codes attached to individual quotes.

Once all of the open coding was completed, coders discussed all of the statements under each code using axial coding—where context and connections across categories were considered (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Any disagreements were handled through discussion until there was a mutually agreed upon solution (Yin, 1989), and a final database showing all agreed upon codes was saved. The final coding scheme and examples of statements were presented to all of the authors for further interpretation and selective coding was used to identify five major themes from the twenty codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While some codes could be used across more than one theme, the authors agreed that the themes articulated the major threads in the data.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Two thirds of participants stated they currently worked in a restaurant while one third reported working at bars, nightclubs, brewpubs, private clubs, stadiums or hotels (see Table 1). The participants were 52% female and 86% white. Approximately half of the participants were over the age of 35 and half of the participants reported more than ten years of experience in the service industry. One third of respondents indicated that their establishment had participated in the eARM study.

Major Themes

We identified five key themes: (1) responsible beverage service training, (2) establishment-level alcohol policies, (3) over service and liability, (4) alcohol and law enforcement, and (5) changes in the alcohol service environment over time.

Responsible Beverage Service Training—Individual codes that contributed to this theme were: a) positive training experience, b) negative training experience, c) training delivery method, and d) training suggestions. Many of the servers, bartenders and managers had participated in some sort of formal RBS training, whether internal, external, or driven by a corporate parent company. In all focus groups, participants reported having experiences with RBS that they thought were informative, useful or generally positive. Managers in both focus groups thought that their RBS programs were working well. For example, one manager stated: *I feel ours is working great. Not only do we do yearly training, but we talk about it as a staff every quarter.* Even managers who were in newly opened establishments found value in recent RBS trainings: *“Learned a lot about laws and how that can help back up servers when they’re in a tricky situation and knowing that they have the law on their side.”*

Servers and bartenders also had experiences with RBS programs that they found useful. Participants had commonly been through many years of RBS training and saw training as mostly a reminder or a way to keep up with changes in service laws. One server said: *“I think it’s worthwhile. It’s a reminder to be more aware and a reminder because you get so busy. You forget what the responsibilities and the consequences are, and I think it’s a good reminder to keep it up front and be aware.”*

While only one manager said that they had a negative experience with an RBS program, many of the servers discussed having participated in RBS trainings that were not helpful, confusing, misinformed or were otherwise not worthwhile. Additionally, some servers had not been compensated for their time during the training, which many participants viewed as unfair.

Many servers also noted that while they took alcohol awareness classes seriously, their management did not. Multiple servers and bartenders noted that their establishments had RBS programs in place simply to reduce their liability insurance and that management did not always take the information in the trainings seriously. For example, one bartender stated: *“It was required by the establishment, and it was taken kind of a backseat, just like, ‘Hey, guys, you gotta do this.’ It wasn’t like, ‘We stand behind this.’ It was just like, ‘You guys have got to do this because it needs to be on file before you can continue to work.’”*

Servers, bartenders and managers had experience with both online and in-person RBS programs. Overwhelmingly, those who had completed online trainings, even younger participants who were web proficient, did not find them useful nor did they prefer them to in-person trainings. One server said: *“I think there should be live classes as a seminar once a month for people who need it instead of online. Online, you really honestly think anyone wants to look at that? No one wants to sit there and read that stuff. You’re at home. You’re comfortable. You’re not paying any attention.”*

Establishment-Level Alcohol Policies—Individual codes that contributed to this theme were: a) establishment-level alcohol policies, b) manager buy-in, c) manager confused/doesn't know, d) discipline/consequences, e) underage concern, f) over service concern, and g) social support/teamwork.

Many participants reported having some form of written policies regarding alcohol service at their establishment. Some managers and servers indicated written policies were given to staff members upon hiring and not really looked at again except if someone was to be fired for a violation like failing a compliance check. Other managers and servers noted that the policy manual was something that was discussed frequently at staff meetings or pre-shift meetings, with lots of reliance on the rules when dealing with challenging customer situations. One security staff member stated: *"I feel like there's a lot of incentive to follow the rules. Not only can the venue get fined but first off you want the staff to be safe and the other patrons to be safe and the money that you'd make off either underage or over serving someone isn't worth that..."*

Many of the managers stated their establishment had a written policy manual. Some reported knowing the location and contents of their policy manuals and communicated this to their staff. However, other managers reported that they did not actually know where to find their establishments' policy manual nor could they describe its contents. Some noted that the manual contents were probably communicated to new servers when they were hired, but others were uncertain of when the policy manual was reviewed with servers. One manager said: *"It's part of the initial training program as well for new servers and bartenders. So, in that sense, it is written. But it's not – I don't believe it's posted. I'm not sure, to be honest."*

All focus groups included discussions indicating the importance of managers supporting staff when the staff complied with responsible alcohol serving policies. Managers perceived that they supported their servers and bartenders and were willing to take over a challenging alcohol refusal. While a few participants noted that managers had not supported their efforts to refuse alcohol sales to intoxicated customers in previous jobs, many of the servers, bartenders and security said their current managers did support them. For example, one bartender said: *"Management will hands down take over any situation. They don't care. They'll disrupt somebody's drinking no problem because they don't want us to lose our job and they don't want us to be responsible."*

Over service and Liability—Codes that contributed to this theme were: a) over service concerns/issues, b) no over service issues, c) liability concerns, d) liability versus personal responsibility, e) issues based on establishment type or special event, f) regulars, g) corporate versus independent ownership, and h) law enforcement and compliance checks.

Our participants indicated that over service is a major concern for both management and alcohol service staff. While participants did not feel they were likely to get cited by police for over service, they generally took liability issues seriously. On the other hand, one server indicated that there could be benefits for over serving alcohol: *"Over consumption, it's kind of a double edged sword, because you don't want to over serve anybody, but also, drinks are one of the most expensive things on our menu, so the more that people are buying, the more*

tips you're going to make. [Also] They – like when you serve them more, they're a little bit happier, they might tip you more, so – and that's the money I make. However, overall, participants valued responsible service over losing tips due to refusing service to intoxicated customers. For example, one bartender said: *"I obviously need my tips, but if I lose a tip, I don't care. I'm not going to think twice about it"*

Participants commonly expressed an awareness of their personal liability if someone were to get injured after they had been served alcohol in their establishment. Many mentioned that they would be liable for various types of harms a customer could experience, even if the customer was not driving. One bartender said: *"It's amazing how many people will come to the bar, and especially when I turn them down for – after I've cut them off, it's like, 'I'm not driving home,' or, 'I just live across the street.' I don't care. You still have to get from here to your front door. I don't know what's going to happen between now and then, so I need to stop serving you now, and you need to have your water."*

Both servers and managers had varied experiences in cutting off intoxicated patrons. Some participants, both managers and servers, felt that their establishments rarely if ever dealt with intoxicated patrons. Other participants had to cut off patrons nearly every shift. While many participants held similar beliefs about not serving obviously intoxicated patrons, there was a large spread in opinions about who should be responsible for cutting off a patron who had consumed too much alcohol. Many servers felt that the onus of cutting off a customer should be placed on the manager. Servers and bartenders mostly agreed that having management cut off intoxicated customers allowed servers to focus on other patrons while not risking losing tips. Some managers felt like it was their sole duty to cut off intoxicated patrons, while others would let their staff do it and back them up as needed. Generally managers said they would support servers' decisions to cut off intoxicated customers. However, many servers shared stories of past (and a few current) managers who pressured them to serve intoxicated customers, including the managers themselves and their friends, despite their discomfort or unwillingness to do so. One bartender said: *"I've dealt with a lot of really intoxicated people, and a lot of times they'll come in on drugs and stuff...other places I worked, it's been trouble, and usually the management is not behind you if it's someone they know or if it's themselves. That's when I've had the worst problem, actually, is having an owner come in completely wasted and want me to serve him and all his wasted friends. It was nice to be able to be like, 'No, no. You have us do these classes. What are you talking about?'... That happened a couple times in that same establishment where management would be like, 'I'm going to go ahead and over serve this person.' I'm like, 'They're yours. I'm not going to do it. I'm not touching that.'"*

In each server focus group discussion, participants reported experience working in hotels, private clubs or at other venues with VIP patrons. A number of servers and bartenders discussed the pressures they felt to continue serving people who spent a lot of money in an establishment, whether through a large business contract or a special event like a wedding. For example, one server shared: *"We have a little bit of a dichotomy in our place. Because we're in a hotel, a lot of hotel guests, all they have to do is make it on the elevator up to the room, but they'll still tell you during training and during shift meetings we're still responsible for not over serving anybody, but because if they fall over and hurt themselves in*

the hotel room, if they trip in a common area space or something, that there's a liability and our – we need to look out for their safety. On the other hand, you get people that come in, they're spending \$400 or \$500 a night for a room and they just dropped \$1,000 in the dining room for dinner, then those policies tend to just be pushed aside... I had some VIPs in and I go to the general manager of the restaurant, I go, man, just so you know, this guy is on his ninth vodka soda splash cranberry, and he walked into the dining room with one, and that's number ten, and he goes, wow, that guy can put them away, and off he went [laughter]. I had water on the table, I ignored him for a little while, but when he ordered number 11, he got number 11."

"Regular" customers were seen as problematic from both managers' and servers' perspectives. Managers generally felt that regulars often expected stronger or free drinks and that this affected an establishment's profits. Many servers described situations where regulars were allowed to over consume and that some behaviors that would not be tolerated by an unknown patron, were allowed for a regular. One server described: *"I see regulars allowed to over consume on a regular basis, falling off their barstool and being helped back up, and this is in a nice place."* However, managers and servers agreed in saying that if a regular customer did get to a point where service was refused, it was much easier to cut off a regular customer than one who was unfamiliar. They reported that oftentimes the regular customer would come back the next day embarrassed and thank them for their concern.

While servers, security, and managers seemed to be aware that they could be held liable for an illegal alcohol sale, a number of participants commented that they wished their customers were also aware of dram shop laws. Every focus group discussion had some mention of the role of personal responsibility for the person consuming the alcohol. Servers, bartenders and security staff vented frustrations about the amount of liability they take on, given their classification as "low-skilled" workers and also lower pay from the establishment. Despite these frustrations, servers, bartenders, and security participants clearly stated that they still felt that part of their job was to keep customers, and thus the larger public, safe from major alcohol harms like drunk driving and assault. As one server said: *"It's safety for the staff and the neighborhood. The neighborhood is counting on the bars to be responsible in what they do."*

Alcohol and Law Enforcement—Individual codes that informed this theme were: a) law enforcement and compliance checks, b) discipline and consequences, c) over service concerns/issues, and d) underage concerns.

We asked participants to describe their relationships with local law enforcement. Since our participants came from multiple cities, experiences reflected a number of different law enforcement agencies. Managers generally had very positive comments about their relationship with their local police and alcohol regulators. Those in urban downtown areas described having good interactions with police at least weekly. Other managers interacted with law enforcement agents less frequently but still had positive perceptions of them. One manager described: *"I speak with and see our local, I guess, officer who's in charge of our neighborhood at least once a month and I have a conversation with him not only once a month but he'll come in, we'll have lunch together and talk about what's going on in the*

community. So, I feel it as a very strong presence not only from him, but on the evenings – especially in the summer time – ‘cause evening officers are walking around throughout the neighborhood and stopping in to say “hi,” see how our night is going, if there’s anything that we need help with.”

Security staff also said that good relationships with law enforcement helped their jobs. In some cities, off-duty police officers were hired as security staff for on-premise establishments, and some participants had worked closely with police officers over the years.

Servers and bartenders did not report having much interaction with police. Servers mostly discussed compliance checks for underage service when discussion topics turned to law enforcement. Many servers and bartenders in our discussions had experienced a compliance check for underage service at some point in their careers. Many also knew that a compliance check would be happening in a certain timeframe because either their local law enforcement agency had sent out letters announcing it, or they had been notified by colleagues in the service industry that checks were happening in their area. While servers felt they were likely to get a citation from serving someone underage, no one had heard of someone getting a citation from police for over service if not connected to an incident like a car crash. Some servers said they used the threat of an over service citation as an excuse while cutting off an intoxicated customer. While the servers knew that they *could* be cited, they reported that they didn’t think it *would* actually happen. For example, as one server described: *“It’s definitely something I use if somebody is getting out of hand. I’m like, ‘Dude, this is beyond my control. Anything that happens to you outside from here, I’m responsible, too, so sorry.’ But I don’t feel it’s likely that it would happen. It’s a nice thing to be able to say so that if they want to get into it, I can be like, “Or I could call the cops now if you want. We can discuss this together.”*

Changes in the Alcohol Service Environment over Time

During open and axial coding, we decided on an individual code for changes over time. During selective coding, this was determined to be a major theme. One additional code that was used in this theme was Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), as every focus group brought up this organization when discussing how the service environment had changed over time.

More than half of our participants had been working in the service industry for more than ten years and offered many perspectives of how the industry had changed from previous decades. Group members repeatedly mentioned a growing awareness of both individual and establishment liability over time. As one manager stated: *“See, now I don’t know if this is the industry changing or just me personally because 10 years ago, it was encouraged that I, as staff, we drink on the job so we could advance our wine knowledge or what not. And now, I couldn’t imagine that – having my staff drinking or drinking while I’m working or any of that. Because I can’t put my liquor license at risk and I can’t accept that liability and that risk.”*

Participants also discussed changes in social norms around drunk driving. Both managers and servers in every group brought up Mothers Against Drunk Driving as an example of this

social change. The more experienced participants felt like there was a “newer” awareness about the risks involved in serving alcohol and that social norms had evolved over time. Less experienced servers and managers were equally concerned about liability issues and they often framed discussions about liability issues beyond drunk driving (i.e. falling, drowning, freezing, etc.). For many servers, when customers said they were walking home or getting a safe ride, it was still not an adequate reason to over serve them. One server said: *“I remember 20 years ago serving someone eight or nine drinks and that was before the change in society. I thought, ‘I’m going to be driving home soon. They might be on the road,’ and so I think more of public safety and the repercussions and all angles, like a lawsuit, et cetera. I don’t even think about the tip. I lose \$20.00, \$30.00, fine. It’s the cost of doing business.”*

The other notable change that a few participants mentioned was the rise in popularity of craft beer. Craft beer is now much more readily available and expected in most establishments in this area of the country. Craft beer can have a much higher alcohol content than “typical” beers. Some participants were concerned that patrons and servers who usually count drinks, would not take into account the sometimes doubled alcohol content of the craft beer. Participants who worked in brewpubs were less concerned about it as they felt their staff was highly trained on the product and their customers were more educated on the beers as well.

Discussion

This study suggests that there are similarities and differences in the individual, personal, and behavioral factors of managers and staff members at alcohol establishments that could influence responsible beverage service. One change at the personal level since the earlier focus groups discussion were held (Gehan et al., 1999) is that over service has become more of a concern for both management and alcohol service staff than was indicated by earlier focus groups. In our study, managers took responsibility for intoxicated customers in their establishments. Some managers indicated that their establishments had policies that specified that managers should cut off intoxicated customers rather than servers. In the 1999 study, Gehan and associates found that no owner or manager reported the existence of a formal policy concerning alcohol service to intoxicated patrons and most servers said that cutting off service to intoxicated patrons was a rare occurrence. Additionally, the previous discussions with managers and owners indicated that management felt it was up to the bartender or server to cut off alcohol service, and that management should only get involved if it was a “big problem”.

Consistent with the previous focus groups from Gehan and associates (1999), some participants indicated that there could be benefits for over serving alcohol. Most servers and bartenders across the U.S. rely on tips as their primary source of income (Lynn & McCall, 2000). Since tips are usually based on a percentage of sales, it is fair for servers to be concerned about refusing further sales and thus losing a portion of their income. Our focus group discussions prompted mixed reactions about the loss of tips when refusing further alcohol service. While many thought it was the cost of doing business, others thought there was still an incentive to over serve alcohol. The ARM and eARM programs recommend a policy that would help establishments proactively address the concern about lost tips by

guaranteeing compensation (e.g., providing money, food, gift cards, etc.) if servers lose a tip due to refusing an alcohol sale (Toomey et al., 2008).

At the time the Gehan and associates' (1999) focus group discussions occurred, few staff members or managers reported having any written responsible alcohol service policies. This led to a core component of the ARM and eARM programs—helping managers to develop a policy manual for their establishments (Toomey et al., 2008; 2017). Staff members who participated in the current focus group study generally knew that there were some written alcohol service policies in place at their establishment. Many reported needing to “sign-off” on a policy manual as part of training into a new position. Servers and bartenders liked being able to rely on establishment level policies when they needed to refuse an alcohol sale. Policies also seemed to explain expectations and rules in the establishment.

While the servers participating in the focus groups seemed aware of their establishments' policies, we found it notable that a number of the participating managers made comments suggesting a lack of awareness of their establishment's policy manual. Some managers reported not knowing where their manual was located, uncertainty about when staff reviewed the manual, what policies it contained, and who had authority to make changes to policies. Future RBS manager-focused programs like ARM and eARM may need additional focus on behavioral factors such as helping managers build skills and intention to keep track of their policies and employee documentation, as well as helping to provide ongoing communication regarding the policies beyond new employee training (e.g., in staff meetings).

Management and staff who participated in similar focus groups in the 1990s saw virtually no risk that they would face action from law enforcement if they violated any alcohol control laws (both underage and service to intoxicated patrons) (Gehan et al., 1999). Participants in our focus groups perceived they had a good relationship with law enforcement and that compliance checks to prevent underage alcohol sales are commonplace now. While current management and staff did fear repercussions from selling to underage patrons, no one in our discussions had heard of anyone receiving a citation for over service. Effective enforcement strategies for reducing over service are not well-established and can be resource intensive, potentially limiting their use by law enforcement officials (Lenk et al., 2014). Until the enforcement environment changes and managers and staff members at alcohol establishments perceive there is a high risk of legal consequences for over service of alcohol, it is possible that RBS programs will continue to have limited effects.

More than half of our participants had been in the service industry for at least ten years. These seasoned professionals spoke frequently about how the industry had changed over time. The major changes that were discussed were: increased awareness/unacceptability of drunk driving; increased awareness of other alcohol-related problems; increased awareness of establishment/personal liability for illegal alcohol sales; and a reduction in drinking on the job. The eARM program put much emphasis on the potential civil liability for over service of alcohol, potential risk of over service of alcohol for drinking and driving and other problems, as well as concerns about drinking on the job (Toomey et al., 2017). It is possible that participants who emphasized these changes were eARM participants. Future, larger

scale studies with representative samples of managers, servers, and security staff are needed to see if these perceptions were unique to our sample.

Based on the discussions, it is clear that the training delivery method for RBS programs has changed over time with more establishments turning to online training for their staff. Online RBS training was described negatively throughout the discussions. The main complaints regarding online classes were that the servers did not learn anything new, they were boring, most people just “clicked through” the content, and they were often not compensated by their employers for taking online trainings. Many participants stated they liked having in-person trainings, especially when they were dynamic and involved active discussions. A randomized control trial of the eARM Program, a hybrid in-person and online alcohol training program, also recently demonstrated the limited efficacy of online training programs in changing behaviors around over service of alcohol (Toomey et al., 2017). Educators wishing to implement future successful training programs may want to give careful consideration to using limited resources to develop online RBS training programs.

While our study highlights that RBS trainings are the norm, written policies are common, and managers and servers are concerned about over service of alcohol, have actual practices pertaining to over service changed over the past several decades? In studies conducted from 1990- the early 2000’s, rates of sales to pseudo-intoxicated patrons were found to be 83% in a Michigan study (McKnight & Streff, 1994), 58% in a California study (Freisthler, 2003), and 68-83% in several Minnesota studies (Lenk et al., 2006; Toomey et al., 1999; 2004). In a very recent study, Toomey and associates (2016) found that servers still sold to pseudo-intoxicated patrons 82% of the time. Although we saw promising advances in personal, behavioral, and environmental factors since the previous focus groups were held, there is obviously still much room for improvement in the actual practice of refusing alcohol sales to obviously intoxicated patrons.

This study has several limitations. First, we used a convenience sample—a standard method for conducting focus group research (Crosby, Salazar, and DiClemente, 2006). While there was diversity in gender, age, role, type of establishment and years in the industry, our sample is limited to those who responded to our advertisements and could participate during our scheduled times. We recruited from a one metropolitan area in the Midwest and the opinions and comments offered in our focus group discussions may not be representative of all service industry professionals. However, we did reach saturation (consistently hearing the same responses and not learning anything new) on nearly every question.

When conducting focus groups there is always a risk of eliciting socially desirable responses to please the other members of the group or researchers. Some members of our focus groups were participants in the eARM program and knew that the focus group leaders were affiliated with the program; these participants might have further wanted to respond positively regarding RBS trainings. However, participants appeared to be candid in their responses, including many admissions of legal violations, which suggests that respondents were truthful in discussions. Reiling and Nusbaumer (2006) conducted a mail survey (N=938) of servers, bartenders, and managers in Indiana. Removing the face-to-face interaction of a focus group, 42% of survey respondents answered “yes” or “maybe” to the

question “*Would you ever knowingly serve an intoxicated customer?*”. Similar to our focus groups, respondents to the mail survey indicated pressure from management and fear of losing tips as reasons to continue serving intoxicated patrons (Reiling and Nusbaumer, 2006). Ultimately a larger national study of managers, servers and security would be needed for more generalizable results on the attitudes of alcohol sales professionals.

Despite these limitations, this study provides an updated insight into the alcohol hospitality industry. Since the previous focus group discussions were held (Gehan et al., 1999), service industry professionals appear to have become increasingly concerned about over service of alcohol in on-premise establishments. But the likelihood of over service of alcohol has not decreased during this time period (Toomey et al., 2016). Results from this study provide some suggestions on how to improve RBS programs. Despite the fact that there is insufficient evidence that RBS programs are effective in reducing sales to intoxicated patrons (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010), they are extremely common in the service industry today. As of 2014, 19 states have laws mandating some type of server training in order to sell alcohol, and an additional 25 states have statutes stating that RBS training is voluntary (National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2014). Our study provides some suggestions on how to improve RBS programs. However, the most important finding may be that managers and staff members still do not perceive a high likelihood of legal consequences for over service of alcohol. Enforcement efforts for over service of alcohol should be explored further.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (R01AA018169-01A1; T. Toomey, Principal Investigator).

Appendix 1: Final Qualitative Codes and Example Quotes

Code	Quote
Positive training experience	The class is because we have to make sure we're actually taking care of each other. Because if I'm running someone else's drinks and I don't feel comfortable and I don't know if they carded, I have to card before the drinks hit the table, and this is all a part of the training. They enforce us to remember that we have to back each other up on it, and it's like huge that they make us do that, even though we're not an establishment where all it is is drinking, but wine is huge.
Negative training experience	[Talking about online alcohol awareness classes] I learned that it was a negative experience because I wasn't reimbursed for the time and the cost of the class, and it is such a dry class, and it was probably 90 percent redundant. The ten percent were just ____ little laws and things that I didn't realize that have never ever come up in any scenario that I needed to use.
Training delivery method	I think there should be live classes as a seminar once a month for people who need it instead of online. Online, you really honestly think anyone wants to look at that? No one wants to sit there and read that stuff. You're at home. You're comfortable. You're not paying any attention. It's a visual thing. I would rather see somebody talk in person than to have to just read something or listen.
Training suggestions	Well, when I did it online, it was like an hour and a half, and it was – I felt like it focused more on taking care of your guest and making sure that their safety is really valued, whereas when we went to the police station, it was more about the criminal side and what can happen to you if you serve someone who's underage. So I felt like it was – I think if they could blend the two together, it may be better. Because one just felt like oh my gosh, I want to

Code	Quote
	quit my job because what if I accidentally do something and I go to jail forever, and the other one was just going above and beyond and watching for certain behavior.
Discipline/consequences	When they're in training, in our restaurant, we also train them specifically inside of our restaurant, the trainer who trains them has training material and a responsible alcohol form that they have to sign off on. It's a fine and immediate dismissal if you serve and we really don't have any problems with it in our restaurant
Establishment level alcohol policies	Yes. It's part of the initial training program as well for new servers and bartenders. So, in that sense, it is written. But it's not – I don't believe it's posted. I'm not sure, to be honest.
Manager buy-in	I've never had an instance where a supervisor did not back me up. We are encouraged to tell the boss, as I mentioned before, and, "Thank you for telling me," is all I've ever heard, and then it's out of my hands. It's wonderful because if somebody is getting belligerent, I don't have to deal with it, and it also involves a person of authority to solve the situation. And people listen better to a supervisor than to a server.
Social support/teamwork	I'm constantly working with the bartenders or the staff and they're letting me know if somebody's being cut off or I'm letting them know if I observe something and not to serve them anymore as well.
Manager confused/doesn't know	I'm a supervisor, and I'm not really sure about the – our alcohol training policies. I mean, I've – I don't know if I belong in this group, I mean, if I'm not aware of that
Underage concern	No, I do it all. We work closely with the cops, though. We – they come in and they purposely sting us like, every six weeks, just to – because my servers are young and they're dumb.
Over service concerns/issues	That's when I've had the worst problem, actually, is having an owner come in completely wasted and want me to serve him and all his wasted friends. It was nice to be able to be like, "No, no. You have us do these classes. What are you talking about?" So that was the one big useful thing of this, I think, for me was that. Because that sucked. That happened a couple times in that same establishment where management would be like, "I'm going to go ahead and over serve this person." I'm like, "They're yours. I'm not going to do it. I'm not touching that."
No over service issues	we're not a bar kind of thing, but – and I've worked there for years now, and I don't think I've seen one drunk person yet or one person that has had too much to drink or even tipsy.
Liability concerns	See, now I don't know if this is the industry changing or just me personally because 10 years ago, it was encouraged that I, as staff, we drink on the job so we could advance our wine knowledge or what not. And now, I couldn't imagine that – having my staff drinking or drinking while I'm working or any of that. Because I can't put my liquor license at risk and I can't accept that liability and that risk.
Liability vs. personal responsibility	Personal responsibility, like you say. I should be able to know, okay, how many drinks can I have before I can drive over so much time, and I should be able to cut myself off as an adult. Why should somebody else, a server, have to be like my parents and cut me off, and then they're responsible if I go and do something?
Issues based on establishment type/special event	We have a little bit of a dichotomy in our place. Because we're in a hotel, a lot of hotel guests, all they have to do is make it on the elevator up to the room, but they'll still tell you during training and during shift meetings we're still responsible for not over serving anybody, but because if they fall over and hurt themselves in the hotel room, if they trip in a common area space or something, that there's a liability and our – we need to look out for their safety. On the other hand, you get people that come in, they're spending \$400 or \$500 a night for a room and they just dropped \$1,000 in the dining room for dinner, then those policies tend to just be pushed aside. I mean, if anybody asks you, they represent what they're supposed to represent, but last night was a great example. I had some VIPs in and I go to the general manager of the restaurant, I go, man, just so you know, this guy is on his ninth vodka soda splash cranberry, and he walked into the dining room with one, and that's number ten, and he goes, wow, that guy can put them away, and off he went [laughter]. I had water on the table, I ignored him for a little while, but when he ordered number 11, he got number 11.

Code	Quote
Regulars	I don't think about would cut off a regular until it was absolutely blatant. I think regulars can get away with a lot more than other people.
Corporate vs. independent	I was just going to say I have a few friends who do independent – I have a few friends who are at a corporate restaurant where they keep on flipping management all the time, so then that constant of like trying to learn some of these new standards, even when it's a corporate standard, where as I feel an independent, there seems to be more stability, so you really get to know your coworkers and feel backed up in that way.
Changes over time	I remember 20 years ago serving someone eight or nine drinks, and that was before the change in society. I thought, "I'm going to be driving home soon. They might be on the road," and so I think more of public safety and the repercussions and all angles, like a lawsuit, et cetera. I don't even think about the tip. I lose \$20.00, \$30.00, fine. It's the cost of doing business.
Law enforcement/compliance checks	I've been stung three times, but it was only for carding★Right, and if you pass, you pass, and if you don't, you're going to get fired, but I don't think any cop – not that I know of has given a citation for over service.
MADD	I think Mothers Against Drunk Drivers has put a lot of pressure to change things and enforce stricter rules.

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Table 1**Participant Characteristics (N=42)¹**

	% (N)
Current Position at Establishment ²	
Manager	17 (7)
Assistant Manager	5 (2)
Bar Manager	7 (3)
Food and Beverage Director	5 (2)
Bartender	33 (14)
Server	52 (22)
Shift Lead Server	5 (2)
Security/Bouncer	7 (3)
Other (Wine Consultant, Trainer, Banquet Manager, General 2Manager)	12 (5)
Type of Establishment Where Currently Employed ²	
Restaurant	67 (28)
Bar	17 (7)
Brewpub	7 (3)
Café/Counter-service	7 (3)
Hotel	10 (4)
Nightclub	7 (3)
Other (Taproom, Stadium, Country Club, Private Club)	12 (5)
Years of Experience in the Service Industry	
Less than 1 Year	5 (2)
1-5 Years	19 (8)
6-10 Years	24 (10)
More than 10 Years	50 (21)
Sex	
Male	45 (19)
Female	49 (22)
Missing	2 (1)
Race	
American Indian or Alaska Native	5 (2)
Asian	5 (2)
Black or African American	5 (2)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0 (0)
White	36 (86)
Missing	5 (2)
Age	
21-30	38 (21)
31-40	26 (11)
41-50	19 (8)
50+	14 (7)

Establishment Participated in eARM Program	
Yes	33 (14)
No	24 (10)
Unknown	40 (17)

¹ One participant did not complete the demographic survey;

² Indicates questions where participants could mark multiple answers resulting in a larger N for that question

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