



# **Getting Wasted: Risky Drinking, Social Support and Harm Reduction**

Informal Support in the World of College Drinking

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# Towards a Sociology of the College Drinking Scene

- Past research is focused on the Individual. Drinking is not an individual outcome, but a SOCIAL process. And harms are generally treated as individual outcomes or symptoms. I wanted to examine how codrinkers work TOGETHER to manage risk.
- Past work pathologized drinking without recognizing the perceived benefits that are communally constructed.
- By using the “Sociological Imagination “ we can see that college drinking is shaped by the larger social institutional, cultural, historical context (e.g., how have trends in child autonomy/parental control affected millennials?)
- My methodology and sociological lens, I think, allows me to make a few unique observations about the college drinking scene.
- There is much informal support given and received in the drinking scene. Universities should find creative ways to draw upon (and in encourage) it. The best defense against harm in the scene may, in fact, be provided by the students themselves. Student should be expected to support one another (code of conduct and orientation) and taught how to deliver support effectively (programming).



## My Study

- I collected over 400 drinking stories, conducted 26 interviews, and performed over 100 hours of field work in bars, house parties, and street festivals.
- Two spinoff studies: 1.) victim worthiness and ambiguity in the drinking scene 2.) The Drinking Family (informal controls delivered by friend groups).



# Why College Students Love to Party

- Most of you have read the literature and know the usual answers to this question. Here is what my informants said:

1.) Intoxication is fun. Obvious? But even negative events are recast as “fun.”

2.) Intoxication lower inhibitions (“takes a few bricks out of the wall”) and facilitates hookups. Alcohol is a resource to deal with shyness/social anxiety. My most surprising finding.

3.) Intoxication creates a “world of adventure where anything can happen.” Everyday interactions become problematic. It provides opportunities to repair problems and demonstrate adult competence.

4.) Friendship groups (Drinking Families) are built around and reinforced by social support (much of it is activated by risky drinking).



## Are They Seeking out Risk and Risk Management opportunities?

- Why are college students returning again and again to this matrix of risk? Are college students seeking out risk and risk management opportunities?
- Here's where the Sociological Imagination comes in...



# Trends in Child Autonomy and Parental Control

- Sociologists suggest that middle-class children have experienced decreasing social autonomy in recent years (Rutherford, Nelson). Social anxieties about child abduction and other child tragedy have been met with amplified parental control.
- Parental Choreography and Surveillance. The “playdate,” for example, is a new development. Spontaneous playgroups appear to be a thing of the past. Parents manage their children’s lives into their adulthood (“helicopter parents”). Adolescents have fewer opportunities to make mistakes and solve their own problems.
- As a result, Emerging adults on campus may be looking for ways to demonstrate adult competence. This is where drunk support comes in....



# Drunk Support

- Major research question: if so much can and does go wrong in the drinking scene, why do they persist? My findings suggest that the answer is....
- Drunk Support: the emotional and/or instrumental supports delivered from one person to an intoxicated other. My major finding is that there is a **TREMENDOUS** amount of DS in the scene. Drunk Support is resource for identity development and a practical context for exercising adult problem solving skills.
- Forms of Drunk Support



## “I’ll Hold Your Hair”: Support for the Drunksick

- Getting Sick Together: Students “parenting” sick friends in the drinking scene.
- Emotional Support and Drunk Counseling
- “Babysitting my roommate is like....it’s like my job.”



## “I Got Your Back”: Fighting and Character Opportunities

- Character Contests and Fighting in the Drinking Scene.
- “Brother Up!”: Emergent Violence allows a student to answer the question, “What kind of friend am I?” “Will I fight to support my friends? Am I reliable, dependable, loyal, faithful?”
- The drinking scene, because it is so risky, is a context for making identity claims and for maintaining those identities.



## “Don’t Worry About it, You Were Hilarious!”: Dangerous Appraisals

- One of the ways in which risky drinking is facilitated is the ways in which co-drinkers comfort their friends after dangerous or embarrassing drinking performances. Positive appraisals and the social contract.
- The Drunk Excuse and Post-Intoxication Dissociation.
- Recasting and redefining negative outcomes in positive ways. “Hangovers are part of the fun!”

# “Stepping In” to reduce victimization

- Students work together to reduce the risk of sexual victimization:
  - Escorting intoxicated friends home
  - aggressively intervening when risk is high
  - Indirectly reducing risk (theatrics, ruses, games, and signals).
- Stepping in tends to be gendered.
- “Victim Worthiness” study (Forthcoming in Deviant Behavior): bystanders intervene when the person perceived to be at risk is a friend, but not when she is a stranger (victim ambiguity) or when she is perceived to be promiscuous.



# Drunk Support and the Drinking Family

- Drunk support might seem sort of random and unsystematic, but I argue that much of it occurs within the context of well-established peer drinking groups that I have named “Drinking Families.”
- The DF is a dynamic core of friends organized around the facilitation of drinking episodes, the pursuit of fun and adventure, and the management of risk. It is one’s usual drinking partners.
- I think of these informal groups as families because they are systems of complementary roles built to accomplish communal tasks. Recent studies show that “Family” is extremely important to “millenials” and that college students turn to the support of fictive kin while away from their parents. This is nothing new (see fictive family structure in university Greek life).
- My current study: Most college drinkers see themselves as part of a drinking family organized around key roles: “The Choreographer,” “The Nurturer,” “The Enforcer,” “The Babysitter,” “the Shit Show.” Our pilot study suggests that drinkers feel least safe when they are drinking outside of the context of their DF (especially when it comes to the risk of sexual victimization.)



# Drunk Support,, Civic Engagement Student Values

- Cultural sociologists suggest that Americans value family, honor, loyalty and self respect. And college students are more “collectivist” and less “individualistic” than conventional wisdom might suggest.
- Move towards “civic engagement” in higher education. We hope to produce “good citizens.” How do we articulate this?
- Code of Conduct: I reviewed your Code of Conduct and it could address these core values more directly and could encourage (demand) students to help one another.

# Some Program Implications

- Objective 1: Encourage Peer Support from Day One: administrators and programmers can capitalize on all of the informal social support in the scene. This means recognizing and encouraging existing support. This should start at orientation. This could be a part of the Code of Conduct
- Objective 2: Use Bystander Intervention training to reduce sexual victimization on campus and, especially, in the drinking scene. Training should aim at recognizing risk and knowing how to respond. Focus on AMBIGUITY. What are the best indicators of pre-rape.? Creating confident and effective bystanders.
- Objective 3: BEYOND BI; Recognize informal peer groups (like the DF) and encourage students to control their own social worlds. Training resident advisors to identify and encourage informal support networks (drinking families). We can capitalize on communal/family oriented goals to encourage students to form and draw support from their college “family.” I have worked with our Resident Advisors on becoming sensitive to DFs on their floor and having RAs appeal to their leadership to reduce risk—another way to demonstrate adult competence.
- Objective 4: Find pro-social ways to encourage demonstration of adult competence. For example, increasing student involvement in governance (e.g., student task force on risky drinking like VSA) If emerging adults are looking for ways to demonstrate adult competence, and to build identity, here’s a positive way to do it.