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Sean B. Hoops  
Macalester College, shoops@macalester.edu

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**Socialization with Alcohol or Alcohol as Socialization: An Actor-Network  
Theory Approach to Understanding College Student Alcohol Use**

By

Sean Hoops

Senior Seminar

Department of Sociology

Macalester College

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**Abstract**

Many studies of college student drinking focus on understanding the problematic consequences of alcohol use. This research, however, does less to illuminate the cultural meanings of the use of alcohol. To address this gap, I examine how students relate to drinking alcohol socially, paying particular attention to how drinking and non-drinking emerge as meaningful behaviors in particular social settings. I analyze drinking qualitatively, focusing on the student perception of the significance of alcohol consumption as part of social interaction to understand the impact that alcohol itself has on the social setting. By employing an Actor-Network Theory framework I conclude that the presence of alcohol defines the setting and the types of interaction that take place. I also find that frequent drinkers, non-frequent drinkers, and abstainers engage in various identity-management strategies to facilitate or impede interaction by using setting-specific strategies.

Popular culture and academic literature focus on the problems of drinking among college students, particularly emphasizing binge drinking (Leppel 2006; Wechsler 1994; Singleton 2008). Although this topic has been explored in great detail, much of the research has been confined to quantitative, large scale surveys. These studies show patterns about drinking behaviors among college students but, they do not provide insight about what alcohol actually means in a social setting for students and how this meaning is non-static, that is, subject to change. This is relevant because students may use alcohol in different ways in different settings, something that would not necessarily be found in large scale survey based study. In addition the large surveys tend to miss the other side of the interaction, the experience of students who partially or completely abstain from the dominant college drinking culture. The focus on quantitative study dichotomizes students into separate groups as drinkers and non-drinkers rather than understanding the way that some students use alcohol differently. The studies on alcohol reduce drinking to a behavior of individual students, sacrificing deeper insights from examining the social elements of drinking.

The purpose of this research is to address these shortcomings. Instead of assuming that individuals have stable identities that are at risk of drinking too much, I examine how any one person can have different alcohol-related identities. The goal is to look closer at drinking as a whole, and to try to understand the variable meanings of alcohol depending on the specific setting. My research indicates that not only does alcohol have a variety of meanings depending on the person's perception, but that the alcohol itself is filled with meaning of its own. I

use Actor-Network Theory to understand the unique position alcohol has in college drinking culture. I argue that the introduction of alcohol into a setting has profound ramifications for the students involved, both those who are drinking and those who are not. Once we understand alcohol as an agent in a social setting, insights from Symbolic Interactionism demonstrate that alcohol is a participant in the social as well, working with the people to create meaning. Seen from this framework, that in some situations students use alcohol to convey their identity to others, while other times, alcohol has agency in itself, causing a significant change in the social setting.

### **Literature Review**

Much has been written on college student drinking; particularly the patterns of binge drinking that emerge in college students. This research is motivated in part by concerns over public health, and fears about the level of alcohol use. Studies into college drinking have been as broad as they are varied, with some studies such as the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (CAS), which included 120 schools and four waves of data collection in 1993, 1997, 1999, and 2001 (Wechsler 2004: 3). With this amount of data, it is no surprise how much has been written on this topic. The CAS has been used as a basis for a large body of literature; it is probably one of the more exhaustive and important surveys of college student drinking. Surveys of college students show over 80 percent of them drank alcohol in the last school year (Wechsler 1996; Kuo 2002:1588) and 44 percent engage in what would be classified as binge drinking, consuming 5 or more drinks in a row (Wechsler 2008:3). Given this

context, most studies of college drinking have been framed in terms of the excessive use of alcohol and the negative ramifications associated with that behavior (Leppel 2006: 519; Wechsler 1994: 628; Singleton 2008:355). Substantial research has also investigated the effectiveness of prevention campaigns on campuses (Wechsler 2008:6). But by treating alcohol use as a relatively stable attribute of individuals, the research misses the way that alcohol can mean different things, and be used in different ways. This paper will cover what quantitative information cannot: how students can convey their own identity through choices of whether or not to drink alcohol in a given setting.

Despite all of the information on the topic of student alcohol use the non-drinking population in colleges has not been extensively explored is. This is not because this population does not exist. Indeed, the 2001 College Alcohol Survey found that “19.3% of students attending 4-year institutions were abstainers during the past year, up significantly from 16.4% in 1993” (Huang 2008:395). Such a significant population of non-drinkers can serve as a way to understand how alcohol interacts with those who are not directly using it. Efforts to address non-drinkers have been sporadic and often do not go in depth with the studied population; however the research finds that the biggest contributor toward a student’s abstinence was a negative attitude toward drinking, and getting drunk (Huang 2008: 407). The study points out that more research is needed to understand “the development of a negative attitude toward alcohol and the salient beliefs that support that attitude” (Huang 2008: 407). However, this analysis treats

alcohol use as individual behavior, where it is more valuable to treat it as part of a larger interaction.

Studies have also found that if a person's closest friend abstains they are more likely to abstain themselves (Huang 2008: 408). If this is the case, it lends credibility to the idea that social interaction occurs partially along drinking and non-drinking lines. This formation could either be because of similarity of drinking patterns, or similarity of individuals who choose not to drink. In either case, it means that drinking habits can act as a prediction of who a person's friends may be or a person's friends may predict their drinking habits.

#### *Peer Influence and Actor-Network Theory*

Debates and research about social influence and its role in frequently emphasize peer pressure on students to participate in drinking. It is widely believed that peer pressure has many effects on students, particularly in the use of drugs and alcohol. One study, which interviewed college students on peer pressure, found that there was substantial concern among students about fitting in, especially in relation to alcohol (Lashbrook 2001: 753). The article goes on to cover many ways that students fear exclusion if they do not join in and drink (Lashbrook 2001: 752-753). The existence of such rhetoric indicates how important alcohol use is to these students for fitting in, and further questions about how students with a variety of drinking behaviors navigate this culture. Since alcohol use principally emerges in social contexts, it lends credence to the idea that alcohol itself can be an actor, excluding some people by its presence. Part of the social setting is a result of alcohol's participation shaping meanings.

Other studies of alcohol and socialization have found students “passing” as a drinker, by holding a single alcoholic drink for an entire evening, or drinking soda when everyone else was drinking alcohol (Nairn et al. 2006:300). This activity reflects an example of a non-drinker feeling the need to invoke the appearance of drinking in a social setting. This sort of passing behavior also implies that identity is not static, but can be manipulated outwardly. “Their strategy confirms the social construction of identities and how identity is in its performance” (Nairn et al. 2006:302). These findings, while shedding light on the non-drinking population, also demonstrate a significant peer influence where alcohol is concerned. They also imply that alcohol use can mean different things and can be employed by students in different ways.

*Actor-Network Theory: Alcohol as an Actor of its Own*

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) argues that when studying the social interaction of actors, one should not confine research to just the people. Many sociologists would argue that the social is strictly from humans. ANT argues that we cannot ignore the web of connections between all things, both human and object. Rather, researchers need to account for all the components that went into the interaction, which includes computers, tables, chairs and all of the things that are a part of a given interaction (Law 1992; Latour 2005). This approach says that in a given social network, the actors, or the people are influenced not only by each other, but by other non-person factors. Law summarizes ANT succinctly:

Networks are composed not only of people, but also of machines, animals, texts, money, architectures -- any material that you care to mention. So the

argument is that the stuff of the social isn't simply human. It is all these other materials too (Law 1992: 3-4).

Thus the actors are all influenced by one another, both human and otherwise.

One of the pioneers of ANT is Bruno Latour. In his piece “Where are the Missing Masses?”, he describes getting into his car, and the seatbelt warning making noise to persuade him to fasten his seatbelt (Latour 2003: 191). He muses:

Where is the morality? In me, a human driver, dominated by the mindless power of an artifact? Or in the artifact forcing me, a mindless human, to obey the law that I freely accepted when I got my driver’s license? Of course, I could have put on my seat belt before the light flashed and the alarm sounded incorporating in my own self that good behavior that everyone –the car, the law, the police – expected of me (Latour, 2003: 191).

This quote highlights the way that the network of meanings in ANT can quickly become complicated to pin down. Essentially what this passage demonstrates is the way that an object, in this case a car, can carry a script for human behavior. Latour is concerned with very specific details, the mechanism that causes the seatbelt warning to occur. In order to simplify things in this study, alcohol as a term is treated as a proxy for alcohol related behaviors. These behaviors, in turn, carry a script like the one Latour is discussing. That is, shot glasses, beer bongs and the alcohol itself all can be considered a sub-set of the alcohol blanket term. This decision was made in order to better align with Latour’s view of individual objects. In addition, when conducting my study, there is no way to separate the

material artifacts of alcohol consumption from the consumption itself. Thus, I treat a set of objects as one: alcohol.

By using this approach, we can understand how adding alcohol to a situation changes the outcome. This is not only because of the physical effects of alcohol, or how people view it, but also by its own impact. Effectively this means that alcohol itself needs to be understood as an actor. An actor is something (or someone) that has some measure of influence over a social interaction.

Introducing alcohol to a situation is much like introducing a new person. It brings many of its own meanings to the interaction, and causes different reactions from different participants. Alcohol can either be a really good friend who is the life of the party, or an attention seeking individual that no one really wants there.

Metaphors aside, this understanding attributes more influence on alcohol and its ability to influence the setting, which is appropriate considering how powerful it is.

One study has examined the link between Actor-Network Theory and student alcohol use. This study looked at high school students and how they interact with alcohol also covering other objects such as a high bust fare (Demant 2009:33). This study was also focused very specifically on single student, and how she uses alcohol. While Demant's focus is different, it does set a precedent for an ANT understanding of alcohol. My study has a very different focus, as well as more abstract understanding of alcohol.

Part of what makes studying alcohol (and drugs as well) difficult is that sociologists struggle with how to address the biological effects which the

substance has on social interaction (Sulkunen 2002: 266). This is where we can look to Actor-Network Theory. When attempting to understand the social, it seems logical to look at the participants and what they think. However, in the special case of alcohol, which carries biological effects as well as many cultural connotations, ANT offers a view with which we can understand this unusual object. Once alcohol is seen in this manner, we can assess how it has an impact on social interaction as a participant. If we understand alcohol as an actor of its own, next we need to address how other actors interact with it. Here we turn to an area not often associated with ANT: Symbolic Interactionism.

#### *Identity Management and Symbolic Interactionism*

The notion of managing one's outward identity is not new to sociology. Identity management has been a frequently studied and theorized area of study. Erving Goffman was a pioneer of this concept in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, arguing that all of our outward interaction with others is defined by these performances, in different "stages" (Goffman 1959:22). He argues that we are always putting on a performance for others, one which is outwardly interpreted as our identity. In alcohol use, an example would be a drinker performing in a different way when he is with other drinkers versus with non-drinkers. Symbolic Interactionism describes the idea that through our interactions with other people and the world around us, we construct meanings for objects. According to Blumer,

First... human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.

Second.... that meaning is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows...

Third....these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer 1969: 2)

Alcohol is an exceptional case. Since it is such a profound, meaning-filled object in our society, to claim that it is a blank slate would not do it justice. There is more to an object than just the reflection of the participants involved, especially in the case of alcohol. Additionally, the physical effects of alcohol give it more weight than other objects as far as the effect it has on socialization. Where Symbolic Interactionism can prove helpful, though, is exploring the way that alcohol does have different meanings for people, while at the same time reserving some meaning for it. It is helpful to think of alcohol as another participant in the Symbolic Interaction, much like a person. ANT is not trying to assert that only objects are important. "ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things 'instead' of human actors..." (Latour 2005: 72), only that they share in the social. Using this understanding, the actor status of alcohol makes a lot of sense. It "shares in the social" with the human actors, creating meanings for interactions and objects. This theory is focuses on the way that alcohol plays a part in shaping the setting along with the human participants.

## **Methods**

In order to assess the way that alcohol plays out in socialization, I conducted ten interviews with students at a small private liberal arts college who

were over the age of 21. The ten interviewees were selected from a larger recruitment survey which asked students to describe their drinking on the following scale: Abstainer, Occasional Drinker, Infrequent Drinker, and Frequent Drinker. These categories were mainly used to allow for a variety of drinking patterns in my interviews. While the categories themselves were not very specific, they allowed me interview students who classified their behaviors involving alcohol differently. The recruitment survey was sent to the entire student body over the age of 21. I chose to talk to this group because they would have the largest set of college drinking experiences to draw on. In addition, by being over the age of 21 legal obstacles to their drinking are not a factor and their identities are perhaps more stable than younger, more recent college entrants.

From those who agreed, I selected ten students, specifically choosing students with different drinking levels. Frequent drinkers were the largest group and abstainers the smallest; however, I made efforts to select for a variety of views rather than an accurate representation of the population distribution. This theoretical basis allowed me to explain all of the perspectives. In total I interviewed three students who classified themselves as abstainers, four frequent drinkers, and three who fell more in the middle.

I asked questions, such as “describe the last time you were drinking (or were with people drinking) in a social setting?” Another key question was “Think of your closest friends. Are their drinking habits similar to your own?” Questions were followed up with more specifics if an interesting avenue of inquiry opened up. The interviews ranged from about 30 to 50 minutes. To protect individual

student's privacy, in this text I used pseudonyms.

### **An Actor Network Theory Approach to Alcohol and Socialization**

In the following section I begin by discussing student socialization in general terms. Then I move on to describe the way that alcohol is used differently in different settings, falling roughly into three types, the drinking party, the non-drinking gathering, and the moderate drinking gathering. I also describe the way one kind of gathering will sometimes shift to another type. I will also discuss the boundaries between groups, and the way types of alcohol can have different influences in a social setting.

#### *Student Socialization*

Students socialize in a variety of ways. Outside of official functions such as school activities or classes drinking patterns have a connection to how a person spends time. Socialization in general is given significant importance by students. Respondents placed emphasis on hanging out with their friends, regardless of the amount of alcohol consumption. The importance of social interaction is played up by this drinking student:

It's that we work hard during the week and then play hard on the weekends and give ourselves an opportunity to relax and not worry about school work or the club or the organizations we're a part of but just kind of have time to socialize.

This student, who spends much of his weekend time drinking, emphasized the importance of the time on stress reduction. As a member of a highly involved sports team who also has to focus on school work, he placed great emphasis on

spending the weekends relaxing and having fun; for him, that means drinking alcohol. He went on to say: “by the end of the week, I mean, it's almost like I need a drink, I need to just relax and do something...” In this case, he would fit into a group of very heavy drinkers, where the primary means of social interaction is either at a big party with lots of alcohol, or at least a party where some drinking is going on. If we see student social interaction in this light, as a necessary way to unwind at the end the week, this has important implications for its value. If students associate social activity with something that is important to them, then how they choose to do so has relevance. This has larger importance because this means that the personal choice of whether to drink alcohol or not has real social ramifications, and has an effect on the peer group of which a person is a part.

One student expressly described the division between heavy drinkers and abstainers with a larger group in the middle.

I feel like definitely the extremes would be more separated and there would be a mix in between, just depending on who your friends normally are. And the people who aren't comfortable with heavy drinkers aren't going to be found with heavy drinkers... It also seems like the people who are really heavy drinkers and just want to get completely wasted find people who want to do the same thing.

Based on what respondents said this characterization appears to hold true. Some students reported almost all of their friends drank a lot, or at least the ones they saw often, whereas the strong abstainers indicated that many or all of their friends did not drink, or drank very little. Within the middle, some people discussed

drinking very little, but some of their friends drink some, while others discussed drinking at variable levels, given the situation. What did seem to hold for all was that if some people were not drinking, to have a good time, there needed to be relatively little alcohol consumption for them to want to spend time in that situation. One respondent characterizes the divide between drinkers and non-drinkers as a difference in interests; however, in this case it also causes a sizable division. This pattern is because if more weight is given to alcohol, it is more likely that non-drinkers would feel alienated by this interaction. As drinking gains focus, it becomes more difficult for non-drinkers to relate.

### **Three Different Ways of Drinking**

To better understand the way that alcohol affects socialization, we will consider three cases of different alcohol use. These divisions are partially used because of actual drinking variation, but also based on the respondents responses. In the interviews, respondents drew their own divisions between students and I have applied that kind of analysis to my assessment of drinking patterns. The first is a party where alcohol is the main focus of the gathering. Think of a house party with lots of drinking. The second is a gathering where no one is drinking, by their own volition. The third is a smaller party, more like a dinner party, where drinking is present in some capacity but does not dominate the gathering. Finally the implications of these boundaries will be considered.

#### *The Drinking Party*

For the first case, the entire focus is on drinking. Students will come to the party to drink, and it is uncommon to see a student who is not drinking in some

capacity. While the level of drinking may vary from student to student, it is this sort of gathering where alcohol has the most power as an actor; people are relying on it for fun, and it is given central focus. Frequent drinkers' use of alcohol reflects this kind of gathering. One student expressly stated that when he thinks back on the most fun occasions, they are usually occasions where he drank heavily. Frequent drinkers discussed the way that drinking is a principle deciding factor in not only socialization but also enjoyment of an event. When drinking respondents were asked to talk about a really good time they had, or a night that was especially memorable, they would refer to drinking as a key component. An illustrative example is where a frequent drinking student was asked if he were not drinking on a weekend why would that be.

Probably out doing something with my girlfriend, at a movie or doing something like that, homework does come into play there as well...but very rarely will I give up both nights to homework or to something that doesn't involve drinking.

For him, the notion of not drinking in a weekend evening is giving up a social opportunity. Others referred to similar sentiments as well, by saying that their most fun nights were those that involved alcohol.

In this kind of interaction, alcohol's presence is highlighted as a main way that students enjoy themselves. It is through the presence of a large amount of alcohol that the party forms and is defined. Such parties also include things like drinking games, which further highlights the way that drinking takes a central focus. As one drinker described it:

If we're just sitting there sipping on a couple of beers and we all kind of decide actually let's get drunk tonight, you know, let's bring out the beer pong table, let's party, let's call people up...

In this case, the respondent describes a conscious decision to call up friends and start a "real" party involving heavy drinking. He highlights the beer pong, and calling people up as two factors, both of which are dependent on a larger, rowdier sort of atmosphere, something that can also be seen in his choice of "let's party."

This decision on the part of participants elevates the status of alcohol. The respondent also pointed out a pattern, that is, often times lots of drinking is accompanied by a large group of people (although this is not always the case). At this juncture, participants acknowledged a willingness to let alcohol be the main drive of interaction. In addition, his mention of the beer pong table indicates that in certain situations, such as the playing of drinking games, alcohol becomes a more powerful agent of influence over the party. As beer pong can serve as a means to the end of drunkenness, this kind of socialization is clearly centered on drinking over other considerations. Alcohol therefore has the most influence as an agent. Gatherings are considered in terms of how much alcohol people are drinking and in what ways are they drinking it. The network of interaction includes alcohol as a key component. The level of fun for participants is heavily influenced in this case by the presence of alcohol. The social interaction is framed in terms of people socializing and playing games while drinking, making the drinking a key part of the socialization. This means that alcohol is more than just

an activity, as the students see a “real” party and a fun evening as involving alcohol.

When asked how primarily drinking respond to primarily non-drinking students in a heavy drinking party, and if it is awkward for the non-drinker a respondent said:

If anything people are very conscious about including them, maybe to the point of overdoing it. It's always people are being super inclusive and wanting to make sure they're doing alright, rather than just being kind of like, oh, another person drinking...I would say that people go out of their way to talk to them...I kind of get the sense from people that it's a little uncomfortable

From this quote, it is evident that drinking participants have to assert some control over the identity they project to the non-drinking students in order for them to not feel awkward. Drinkers are aware of the differences between these groups and alter their behavior to be more inclusive towards the non-drinking participants.

Another case of this kind of awkwardness is described below by a participant talking about a friend who has recently decided to stop drinking:

Him not drinking is kind of a thing that started toward the end of the summer, I guess no one's really sure why... but it's kind of a weird situation that none of us really understand to tell you the truth...I think that he feels a little uncomfortable because he's not being a part of what we're being a part of which is the drinking culture so it's not.... I don't think it's

the alcohol that made him the life of the party but I think he does feel outside of the party because he's not drinking alcohol.

There are several important concepts to highlight in this quote. First, a friend who changed his drinking patterns is met with uncertainty by his drinking friend. For the respondent, his friend's decision to stop drinking had a considerable impact on their relationship. Secondly, he explicitly references discomfort in this case describing how he thinks his friend feels uncomfortable, while also pointing out that he doesn't understand it and sees it as a "weird" situation. Finally, he refers to the fact that he thinks his friend feels outside the party because he is not drinking. Whether his friend does feel this way, the respondent imagines that without drinking, he must feel excluded and left out of this situation. All of these factors point to the great weight given to alcohol in this interaction. Furthermore, the fact that strain is placed on this relationship is in part due to his friend's shift in identity from someone who drinks to someone who does not. These issues are due to the fact that his socialization is dependent on alcohol having a central focus in the social setting. When his friend is not participating in this setting, he is not engaging in the same type of social interaction as everyone else. Having non-drinking friends at a party can make those who are emphasizing the importance of alcohol feel uneasy.

When presented with a situation where not very many people are drinking or are not drinking heavily, drinkers need to adjust accordingly to have a good time. One respondent expressly stated that he will on occasion abstain from his usual routine of drinking heavily if he wants to spend time with his non-drinking

friends. Thus a lighter-drinking gathering carries very specific expectations from participants, and when people are not necessarily participating in the same way, problems can arise.

### *The Non-Drinking Gathering*

The second kind of interaction is one based on the opposite of the previous case, that is, having no alcohol. This does not include settings such as class or a lecture where alcohol is by definition inappropriate. Rather, it is a case where students are choosing to not include alcohol in their socializing. This case also places a great deal of emphasis on the power of alcohol to change a situation or to change a person. Alcohol serves as a strong actor for them too.

When abstainers choose to socialize, considerations of alcohol often do not even occur to them. Their idea of a fun time is watching a movie with friends or maybe playing a board game. These kinds of gatherings deliberately do not include alcohol. An interesting case was when one student described a “chocolate progressive”. This party is explicitly referencing a drinking progressive where students go from one location to another, with each “stop” having a different alcoholic beverage. In this case, alcohol is replaced with chocolate. The distinction between alcohol use and abstinence is indicated by referring to their progressive as a “chocolate progressive” to distinguish it from the broader group of college progressives, which almost always involve alcohol. The chocolate progressive example is of particular interest, because it is an example of an activity that is routinely a drinking one which they chose to make into something

that is not. Thus it is not the activity that bothers them per se, but the inclusion of alcohol.

Non-drinkers in particular expressed how socializing with drinkers was not fun or interesting to them, highlighting the way that alcohol itself shapes the interaction. As one respondent put it:

It's just not interesting to be at a party where the main thing they do is drinking, I mean there can also be parties too, where the main thing they do is something else and there's drinking on the side. But if drinking's the goal and that's not what you're after then there's really no point to be there.

This quote exemplifies these differences. Not only is the drinking, non-drinking social divide especially obvious from this quote, but additionally, this respondent discusses the way that for her, drinking is not the goal, making drinking-centric parties neither fun, nor interesting. When alcohol's presence becomes a central component of a party, the enjoyment of the non-drinking participant is lessened. It can also be seen that this quote draws a line between drinking and the parties where the "main" goal is drinking. The implication, then, is that alcohol consumption can have different meanings in different contexts. This respondent, a non-drinker, notably does not view all alcohol use negatively, being careful to discuss it in terms of the main focus. It would be fine if it were a factor in socialization, it is only when it takes center stage that she objects. She then, would fall closer to the other end of the drinking spectrum, where she does not drink at all, and to hang out with heavy drinkers is neither interesting nor fun for her. She also points out another big idea, the "main" thing being drinking. She

definitely sees a variety of ways that people employ alcohol where sometimes it is given central focus, and sometimes it takes a backseat. This makes the divisions in socialization apparent and shows how students do see differing levels of drinking as having distinctly different meanings.

For the non-drinker engaging in a drinking activity, alcohol also has a great deal of agency in that it discourages their enjoyment when present. Even without using the alcohol the non-drinkers experience the power it has over the social situation. These students also routinely describe alcohol in terms of intoxication being bad or undesirable. In the following excerpt, one respondent explains her feelings on alcohol as enjoyment:

I guess not having the personal experience of what it really does feel like to be wasted and if that does actually make that a better or a more pleasant time...it seems to me as though it wouldn't and as though if we're having fun there's something else we could address instead of doing something like that.

As a person who does not drink except on rare occasions, she cannot understand what the draw of heavy drinking is. For her, the draw of socialization should be something addressed through her friends and the activity itself, not just adding alcohol. She places emphasis on the physical effects of alcohol, viewing them very critically. She is interacting with the concept of alcohol, as she does not know what it is like to be heavily intoxicated, but it is also a real critique of altering one's mind state in order to have a better time. For her, that experience is undesirable. This critique of alcohol was common among the non-drinking and

light drinking participants, who view a high level of intoxication with a very critical eye. For them, alcohol has a very powerful meaning, and changes not only socialization, but a person in general. This finding holds with the previous research that asserted that the principle factor that abstainers disliked about drinking were the negative associations with alcohol (Huang 2008:407). A good analogy is to think of alcohol as another participant in a party, like another guest. For heavy drinkers, when this guest shows up, they are excited and think that it makes the party much better. For abstainers, this guest is an unwanted person showing up at a gathering, and that can make things much less fun for them.

Evidently for non-drinkers, drinking is very important for shaping the nature of a social gathering. For moderate and non-drinkers, social gatherings are principally to spend time with friends, with or without alcohol. These groups place emphasis on games, and talking to friends whereas heavier drinkers place emphasis on the fact that alcohol is a major factor. To some degree lighter drinkers or abstainers seem to see drinking for drinking's sake to be a waste of time. When discussing drinking, this student who does drink (even heavily, on occasion, said):

More time sober equals better. Um, yeah, so, I guess I'm kind of a hypocrite because I'm not like always not super [condemning] everyone who does but yeah, I mean, it just seems like a waste of time otherwise, I don't know.

This quote illustrates the way in which the non-drinker and the light drinker see the heavy drinking environment. Variations of “there are more interesting things

to do” permeate much of their discourse. Drinking in these contexts carries a different meaning. In the first case, where it is a smaller setting with less alcohol, drinking is not the focus, and is not necessary for the enjoyment of participants. Drinking is of secondary importance.

*Wine With Dinner: The Experience of Moderate Drinking*

Perhaps the most compelling situation is where students use alcohol more moderately. The typical case for this kind of use would be a small gathering of friends opening a bottle of wine with dinner. Indeed, the rhetoric of wine with dinner came out many times in discussions with light drinkers and non-drinkers, as being something very different from other kinds of alcohol use. For this kind of gathering, alcohol has almost no agency. This relationship with alcohol most clearly relates to Symbolic Interaction. These students are forming their own meanings for alcohol and employing them differently for different reasons.

These students who drink moderate amounts of alcohol navigate the boundaries between drinking and non-drinking gatherings nearly seamlessly. One student, who does not typically drink more than one or two drinks but does participate in heavy drinking on occasion, uses alcohol in this manner. By drinking a lot, she is able to cross the boundary into a drinking party but does not have to. Interestingly, she indicated that when people have this view, parties tend not to get as out of hand. Comparing an outrageous party to a low key one she says:

[at a big party] you get drunk, you sing...songs, you play....drinking games, but still the focus is drinking and getting drunk and having fun in

purely that way.... If you're in a smaller group and you just happen to be drinking, then, that's not the intent of the evening.

She illustrates the difference between two types of drinking, heavy drinking where the purpose is drinking, and lighter drinker, where you just “happen to be drinking.” The phrase “just happen to be drinking” is also of interest. This wording makes it clear that drinking is of little to no consequence, taking a backseat to the root of the interaction. She is clearly able to have fun drinking and getting drunk, but at the same time, understands that it is a different kind of behavior. Stating, “in purely that way” also lends credence to the idea that when it is given sufficient emphasis, alcohol becomes a principle part of the interaction. She can see both and navigate both, but indicates that with a smaller group with drinking it is unlikely it will get out of hand. The presence of a large rowdy group changes things as well as the presence of a lot of alcohol. An occasional drinker, provided the following example:

“[The last time I drank] I went over to my friend’s house off campus, uh and we just had like take-out and wine and all of us had about two glasses of wine so no one was drunk... we were watching *Clue* or something, just had some Australian wine”

Here the drinking takes a backseat to socialization and actually becomes almost invisible (“just had”). This is reminiscent of the previous example as well. The drinking in a case like this has no more significance than the food. The importance can be very different, depending on the amount of alcohol, and how much it is the focus. As one respondent put it:

Just one of the people [at the gathering] was like “Oh hey, let’s open up some wine...so I think he maybe wanted to get drunk and we were like “okay, we don’t want to get drunk, but like, you want to drink and we’d be okay having wine as well.”

In this case, the event was not expressly designated to be drinking, but one participant made it a part of the event. The majority of people were not interested in making alcohol the focus, so it was present in a secondary capacity. Had the majority wanted to drink a lot, things would have turned out differently. The symbolic meaning of alcohol would have been different. The meanings placed on alcohol by the group are very much at play in this type of gathering.

In these gatherings the alcohol is a secondary consideration. Students will drink, but it is not for the express purpose of getting drunk. Framing alcohol this way students do not place emphasis on it, and it is not able to dominate the setting as it does in larger drinking gatherings. Additionally, the participants are not vehemently opposed to its inclusion as they would be in a non-drinking gathering. Ultimately, this kind of gathering can be comprised of any kind of student, regardless of their drinking pattern, provided they are fine with light drinking being present (which all my abstainer informants indicated they were).

### *A Shift in Drinking*

As intoxication and alcohol use increases, the event can shift to become a drinking centric event. It could be like the earlier example where a group “sipping beers” decided that they really wanted to party and get drunk, or it could occur less deliberately. The latter is explained by one respondent:

[The last time I was around people drinking] would have been a couple of weeks ago... some of my friends from home came up and they were drinking and we were just kind of hanging out playing Settlers of Catan, and I was just watching them. [She was not drinking or playing the game].

When the respondent mentions watching her friends play a board game in a smaller setting with some wine, the alcohol is not the focus, sinking to the background of that interaction. However, as her friends continued to drink, the focus changed:

When everything turned to clearly like “We drinking to drink”, instead of we’re socializing and drinking at the same time that kinda when I was kind just like, “okay this isn’t entertaining anymore.”

The increased alcohol prevalence had a significant impact on the kind of environment. In this case, drinking to excess was not a planned part of the evening, but something that emerged as things progressed. Once it emerged, alcohol took the place of a dominant actant. This affected the level of enjoyment of this non-drinking participant. While watching her friends drink and play a game she was having fun, but once everyone became more intoxicated things changed. She felt as though the focus had changed to something different: drinking in order to get intoxicated. She saw the new social interaction as a different kind of interaction because of the alcohol. Alcohol exerted agency in this setting, affecting not only a physical change in her friends, but also changing the purpose of the social gathering. In her eyes it was no longer an activity that was appealing or inclusive and had a profound effect on her enjoyment. More alcohol

meant that the gathering became focused on that component of socialization, alienating this participant.

Contrasting this with the previous case, increased drinking had the effect of changing the tone of the event, where in the “wine with dinner” case, drunkenness never became a factor. Drinking heavily makes alcohol a more prominent actor in the social setting. In this case, it actually changed the tone of the event to one of intimate socialization and board games to “drinking to drink.” This sort of shift, with the focus placed on the alcohol, is exactly how ANT plays into these interactions. The respondent was having fun hanging out with her friends, even with alcohol present, but once that passed a certain threshold, the event stopped being an enjoyable experience for her as a non-drinker. Once her friends became drunk, the effect of the alcohol changed the interaction in an alienating way.

#### *Implications of These Settings*

The agency of alcohol can be seen in the way that a person identifies a party with a lot of alcohol as having a very different feel than a party without alcohol. Alcohol plays the part of an actor, shaping the event, in a way similar to a human. When a frequent drinker talks about a lot of alcohol at a party, and alcohol making it fun, the alcohol is responsible for the fun more than any one person. If a non-drinker emphasizes what it is they do not like about a big party, it is the fact that the focus is on the drinking and not the interactions. It is as if the same group of people socializing in the presence of alcohol would be totally different than the same group without alcohol. In fact the previous respondent’s

discussion with her friends playing a board game is exactly that case. The amount of drinking too is of consequence as one student recounts: “it’s one thing if you’re at the point where everyone around you has had two or three drinks, it’s entirely different if everyone’s had six or seven and is like kind of starting to lose it.” This kind of discussion explicitly draws attention to these differences and the awareness of these differences. It points out that alcohol’s ability to affect an event is in part a function of the quantity of alcohol that is present. What is of particular interest is that it is the non-drinkers who think that alcohol has the most influence. This means that while the physical effects of alcohol do come into play, the people who are socially affected the most are the non-drinkers. Non-drinkers are the ones who are feeling alcohol’s power as a participant the most in a situation.

#### *Types of alcohol*

A final point is that students attribute different significance to different kinds of alcohol. The variable significance is seen most in the moderate drinkers and the abstainers, but somewhat in the heavy drinkers. Variations on the theme of “wine with dinner” are the most common manifestations of the variable meanings of alcohol types. As was reflected in earlier quotes, respondents compare the types of drinking differently. One example above that was particularly useful discussed having “a little Australian wine” with dinner. Another compared “sipping on beers” to actually getting drunk. It is clear, then, that certain alcohols are associated with different kinds of drinking. As one person put it referring to drinking around his friend who does not drink:

I'm really uncomfortable talking about [his not drinking] and whenever I am taking a shot, something that seems more than sipping a beer and he's around I know I get really uncomfortable.

He draws a very specific line between “sipping a beer” and taking a shot around his friend who does not drink. By emphasizing this difference, it is clear that he views a shot in a very different way than he views drinking beers. A shot makes things uncomfortable between drinkers and non-drinkers, in a way that beers do not. The uncomfortable feeling is also likely because the increasing intoxication level results in a situation where alcohol has more agency. It is similar to the effect of drinking games. In that case, the game is to encourage drinking in a way that not playing does not. The same can be said of taking a shot. Drinking hard alcohol is much more likely to be associated with drinking for drunkenness than social drinking. When there is a small amount of drinking alcohol does not have a lot of power, thus its potential to create an awkward situation is reduced.

With beer and wine being treated differently than other alcohols there is clearly one meaning for that kind of drink and another entirely for a shot of vodka. Hard liquors seem to be only associated with heavy drinking and the lighter side of drinking is exemplified by wine and beer. Perhaps this is due the lower alcohol content, or perhaps it is a result of some kind of class distinction, with wine and beer being more likely to be something that is appreciated, not something which is used exclusively for intoxication.

## **Conclusion**

By examining alcohol as an actor that can define a social setting, this

study makes a contribution that is not otherwise seen in the literature. The previous large scale studies tend to associate drinking behaviors with static identities. This study works to complicate that notion. The influence of alcohol as an actor depends on the amount present and the focus placed on it. If there is a dinner party with a bottle of wine, that has a very different meaning than a house party with a keg. The more focus there is on the alcohol, the more likely it is to be a principle player in the social interaction. The distinction between a gathering with a lot of alcohol and a gathering with little alcohol is well summarized by thinking of it as a distinction between alcohol as a drink, and alcohol as a means for easing socialization. Wine with dinner is socializing with drinking, while a big house party would be drinking as socialization. The difference is that in the latter, the point of the gathering, and the source of the enjoyment comes from the drinking. When alcohol is thought of as the life of the party that is where it carries the most weight and power.

Students use alcohol in a variety of ways, some never, and others regularly. This behavior can vary greatly within one student, or it can be somewhat consistent. To summarize a person's drinking habits based on the amount of alcohol they consume is too simple. That being said there are some patterns that emerge. The primarily non-drinking student is the most likely to find alcohol to be a negative, and powerful, influence on people who choose to use it. The reverse is that the frequent drinking students routinely think of alcohol as a very powerful tool of social interaction, citing drinking as the principle way to have a good time on the weekends. For both groups, alcohol is an actor in the

situation that has a high level of influence. They view it as a principle player in the social interaction. Even for those who are not drinking, alcohol can have a powerful influence. Indeed, I found that the non-drinking students were among the most likely to feel like alcohol excluded them from a situation. This means that despite the fact that they do not drink, alcohol acts as a way to inhibit their interaction with those who are drinking.

In between these groups we see what is perhaps the most compelling group, which uses alcohol in different ways in different situations. For them, alcohol is a tool to be employed. If they want to socialize while drinking heavily, they can, but if they do not, they can choose to abstain. Alcohol's status as an actor has the least sway over more moderate group, as they choose to use their own agency where alcohol is concerned. Typically, they seem to have more in common with the abstainers than the heavier drinkers in terms of their feelings on heavy drinking and socialization; however, this is far from conclusive.

What is seen is this relationship with alcohol is a mixture of Symbolic Interaction and Actor-Network Theory. In a social interaction that includes alcohol, both the agency of the people shaping the interaction comes into play, as does the agency of the alcohol. This means that students are defining meanings for alcohol in a social interaction, at the same time that alcohol is defining the meaning of the interaction itself. Different students saw alcohol differently and placed their own meanings onto it, and for some students, alcohol's meaning is subject to change. Despite this, it is still a powerful symbol that can have a variety of influences on people. Alcohol's introduction to a social setting will change it,

and in this way, it needs to be understood as an actor. Essentially, we can understand alcohol as another actor that interacts, creating symbolic meaning. If we think of alcohol like a person, then we can see how it is able to effects a change in the interaction.

It is important to note that alcohol exerts influence as an actor in two ways. It acts in the physical, making students drunk. But it also acts in the social, where its presence changes the outcome of an event. What this means is that while drunkenness plays a part, so does alcohol's presence. The fact the non-drinking students ascribe power to it as a substance is evidence of this claim. As they are unaffected by alcohol physically, it can only exert indirect influence over them. Finally, because at a drinking party students drink at different levels and have varying levels of intoxication, the physical effects are not as important as the tone of the evening. This tone is not dependent on physical response, but on the kind of party being organized. If it is a large party with lots of alcohol, we will see the agency of alcohol regardless of how much students are drinking and its alienating impacts on non-drinkers.

While this study has indicated some significant findings about the variable perception of alcohol by students, there are limits to the findings. As is such with a great deal of qualitative work, this study is on a small scale. The number of participants was small, and they were taken from one specific college. It is reasonable to think that their views may not hold true for a larger group. College-educated students certainly do not speak for all people and this particular college is very selective, further limiting the scope of the focus. It is also possible that

with the small number of participants, their views do not reflect the larger student body. Finally, because participation was voluntary, it is also possible that only opinionated, outspoken students chose to speak to me. While only talking to students over the age of 21 had some practical advantages and may have offered a more stable identity than talking to those who are younger, it also further limits the breadth of the study, making the results even more specific. Further research is necessary to discover to what degree these findings hold true for a larger population or for those who are not undergraduates in college. And while qualitative interviews did limit the scope of the findings, they also allowed for a more in depth level of detail than is typical in quantitative, large-scale studies.

While one specific school does limit the scope of these findings, it also allows for a deeper understanding not complicated by too many variables. Had efforts been made to interview students from a variety of schools and a variety of ages, there would have been less consistent information to work with, and it would have been harder to focus on just the differences in alcohol treatment. This study also opens up many additional questions, such as the way that alcohol use may be different from one school to another and from one age group to another. Also, ANT may be an under-utilized frame for understanding the power of objects such as alcohol that have very strong social meanings. I can imagine social artifacts such as movies, music or even food could benefit from this kind of study. Ultimately, in depth interviews with an understanding of ANT could provide new insight.

Despite the very narrow focus of this research, viewing alcohol through an ANT lens sheds light on alcohol as a very powerful object in college culture. These particular examples may be narrow in scope, but adopting ANT for a large group would be both fascinating, and valuable. It is uncertain what kind of agency alcohol would have outside of a college setting. It is possible that much of its influence is due to the unique setting of a college, although there is no way to know for certain without further research. This area is of special interest, as it would be fascinating to know what kind of effect alcohol has in the socialization of other groups.

In addition, my treatment of the many alcohol related artifacts as one object had its benefits, but further research could examine the way that these artifacts influence gatherings on their own. My use of interviews meant I could not dig into the meaning of a beer pong table or a shot glass, but further ANT research could use participant observation to assess to what degree a beer pong table asserts agency as compared to something like beer. Results of such a study would be fascinating and reveal where the actual drink's power ends and the other material artifacts begin.

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