College Women's Gender Identity and Their Drinking Choices

Elizabeth Likis-Werle and L. DiAnne Borders

Because college women's drinking rates now rival men's rates, the authors interviewed college women to ascertain how gender identity affected their drinking choices. Interpretative phenomenological analysis indicated that high-risk drinkers viewed their gender identity differently than did low-risk drinkers. Counseling implications are discussed.

Keywords: gender identity, college women's drinking, interpretative phenomenological analysis

Historically, researchers have documented gender differences in drinking patterns, concluding that men drink more than women (e.g., Borsari & Carey, 2006; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004). However, in the past decade, researchers have pointed to a convergence in the high-risk (HR) drinking rates of college men and women (American College Health Association, 2011; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenburg, & Miech, 2014; Piane & Safer, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2002). In fact, in the spring of 2011, a slightly higher percentage of college women than men reported drinking in the past 30 days (American College Health Association, 2011). Researchers have begun to raise concerns about the specific alcohol-related dangers to women, such as health consequences, sexual violence, unplanned sexual activity, and sexually transmitted infections (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2007; M. A. Smith & Berger, 2010; W. B. Smith & Weisner, 2000), and have noted that women are starting to drink at earlier ages, which is a factor that has been positively correlated with developing alcohol dependence (see Likis-Werle, 2012, for a comprehensive review). Beyond these quantitative investigations, there is little research examining what contributes to these changes in women's drinking rates and, subsequently, how counselors can effectively intervene to change drinking behaviors.

Some researchers have speculated that social and environmental factors have accelerated the trends in increased women's drinking. Piane and Safer (2008) recommended probing the specific gender, societal, and peer influences that might be contributing to the increases in college women's

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HR drinking. Ricciardelli, Connor, Williams, and Young (2001) echoed this call, stating that women's drinking is worthy of study "in its own right" (p. 135). Exploring college women's gender identity (GI), or how they think about their biological sex, provides one avenue for responding to these calls. Hoffman, Borders, and Hattie (2000) defined GI as a fluid concept wherein a woman determines how well she fits with her idea of femininity and how much salience gender has for her. GI includes messages from family, peers, and society that a woman internalizes about how her sex should behave. In the post–women's liberation movement, as gender roles have become more egalitarian, the current generation of college women may not be bound by the same GI expectations as previous generations. Indeed, researchers in countries such as the Czech Republic (Kubicka & Csémy, 2008), New Zealand (Lyons & Willott, 2008), Australia (Sheehan & Ridge, 2001), and many others (Rahav, Wilsnack, Bloomfield, Gmel, & Kuntsche, 2006) have acknowledged the parallel between evolving social roles and women's drinking, positing that the more socially evolved the country, the more the women drink.

In one U.S. study, Peralta, Steele, Nofziger, and Rickles (2010) explored relationships among gender roles, GI, and drinking, specifically investigating whether drinking was a way to express masculinity. They found that college women who endorsed traditional gender roles drank less than those who endorsed nontraditional gender roles, suggesting that binge drinking by college women could be a "[response] to sexism through claiming a type of status or power" (p. 359). However, Peralta et al. noted that their results were based on trait-based gender measures from the 1970s in which instrumentality and leadership were considered male traits, and expressiveness and caring for children were considered female traits. They acknowledged that cultural shifts have made these measures inadequate and suggested that qualitative research could help develop more current gender measures.

A few researchers have explored college women's drinking qualitatively through a gender lens (MacNeela & Bredin, 2010; M. A. Smith & Berger, 2010; Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, & D'Arcy, 2005). Those researchers identified themes of bonding, caretaking, gaining power or social status, expressing sexuality, rebellion, and female empowerment. Women emulating male drinking behavior to gain social status (Young et al., 2005) and expressing themselves sexually and rebelling (MacNeela & Bredin, 2010) were contrasted with traditional gender expectations of women. However, these results were primarily based in studies of existing social groups (e.g., sororities). It is not clear whether similar themes, especially those around bonding and caretaking, would be as predominant when interviewing women independent of their social groups.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to gain a fuller picture of how college women think of their sex and to explore the connection between their GI and drinking choices as a step toward developing tailored counseling interventions for college women who drink. Given the nascent status of

research in this area, we chose the qualitative phenomenological approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008) to elucidate college women's thinking regarding gender in their drinking choices. Phenomenology, and IPA in particular, is appropriate when exploring how participants make meaning of their experiences and gives voice to the contextual factors that affect the social construction of these experiences (J. A. Smith, 2004). J. A. Smith (2004) also noted that IPA is inductive, being "flexible enough to allow unanticipated topics or themes to emerge during analysis" (p. 43) and allowing for several levels of interpretation. In seeking to explore contextual factors and potential new themes, our study expanded on previous research in several ways. First, we recruited women who were not part of an organized social group to minimize existing shared gender expectations and familiarity with each other. Second, we divided participants into low-risk (LR) and HR drinkers to identify influences of participants' GI on different drinking behaviors because we wondered if contrasting findings might suggest factors that need to be considered in designing interventions for HR drinkers. Third, we asked participants to complete the Hoffman Gender Scale (HGS; Hoffman et al., 2000) based in current social constructions of GI rather than outdated trait-based scales, hoping that completing the scale would stimulate more detailed and concrete discussion regarding their GI.

Method

Participants

Participants were nine full-time female undergraduates attending a midsized public university in the southeast United States, including 1st-year ($n = 3$), 2nd-year ($n = 2$), 3rd-year ($n = 2$), and 4th-year ($n = 2$) students, ages 18–21 ($M = 19.56$, $SD = 1.01$). Six were Caucasian, two were African American, and one was American Indian. Each self-identified as a "current drinker," defined as having had at least one alcoholic drink in the past 2 weeks. The sample size follows recommendations in qualitative methodologies, such as phenomenology, in which rich, thick descriptions are gathered from a small purposeful population (Creswell, 2007; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). The university was located in an urban area of a midsized city with an enrollment of 18,000 undergraduate and graduate students, an active Greek life with 19 fraternities and sororities, and 17 National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I athletic teams (excluding football).

Measures

Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). The AUDIT (Saunders, Aasland, Babor, De la Fuente, & Grant, 1993), the most often used alcohol screening tool in college drinking research (Devos-Comby & Lange, 2008), is a 10-item questionnaire measuring hazardous drinking based on the amount, frequency, and consequences of alcohol use. Points from 0 to 4 are

assigned based on respondents' answers (e.g., "How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?" 0 = *never*, 4 = *4+ times a week*; "How often during the last year have you found that you were not able to stop drinking once you started?" 0 = *never*, 4 = *daily/almost daily*). Total scores range from 0 to 40, with a cutoff of high-risk drinking at 8 or higher. Researchers have advocated lowering the cutoff score for women to account for physiological differences and to increase scale sensitivity (e.g., DeMartini & Carey, 2012; Olthuis, Zamboanga, Ham, & Van Tyne, 2011). Thus, the recommended cutoff score of 7 was used in this study to assign participants either to the HR focus group (score of 7+) or the LR focus group (score between 0 and 6).

Demographic questionnaire. Participants reported their age; year in school; sex; race; affiliation with athletic teams, sororities, or other clubs; and current drinking amount and frequency. This information was used to verify inclusion criteria (e.g., current drinker between the ages of 18 and 24). Researchers have supported narrowing this age range because this specific developmental time frame of traditional-age college students is part of the social context for the phenomenon being investigated (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2007; M. A. Smith & Berger, 2010).

HGS. The HGS (Hoffman et al., 2000) measures current social constructions of GI via gender self-confidence, defined as "the intensity of an individual's belief that s/he meets his or her personal standards for femininity or masculinity" (p. 481). The 14-item scale includes two subscales, Gender Self-Acceptance (GSA; how comfortable a female is with her gender) and Gender Self-Definition (GSD; how important being a female is to one's identity). The two subscales were supported by factor analysis and tests of construct and discriminant validity, with reliability coefficients of .90 (GSA) and .88 (GSD; Hoffman et al., 2000). For this study, reliability coefficients were .86 for the GSD and .78 for the GSA.

Procedure

Characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007) and to meet the inclusion criteria, purposeful sampling was used in recruitment. I (the first author) attended undergraduate counseling courses and introductory communications courses and explained that the purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding about college women's experiences of drinking and how they view themselves as women in today's world. I provided my contact information and requested that interested women contact me for interviews. With institutional review board permission, a waiver of signed informed consent was granted to ensure confidentiality, because underage students were asked about drinking. Participants were assigned a pseudonym that was used in completion of an online AUDIT, in the interview process, and for data analysis. Kress and Shoffner (2007) promoted focus groups for exploratory research, especially when the social construction of meaning making is important to the phenomenon being studied. Focus groups, conducted separately for HR and LR drinkers, allowed the college

women's discussions of GI to be observed firsthand during the interviews and for themes to organically emerge related to collective perceptions of college women. They were conducted in a confidential clinic on campus, were video recorded, and lasted 90 minutes. Incentives included $5 cash, pizza, and nonalcoholic drinks for each participant.

Interview Protocol

This was part of a larger study that included interview questions about other drinking-related experiences. The semistructured interview began with general questions (e.g., "Describe your social life here at college"), then shifted to questions about participants' experiences with drinking (e.g., "Tell me about the last time you drank alcohol"). The HGS was administered midway through the interview to expand participants' conceptions of gender in a concrete manner, followed by questions regarding gender perceptions (e.g., "What is it like to be a college woman today?"). The final questions focused on how women drink differently around men and their experiences related to gender equality (e.g., "Tell me about a time when you felt you were equal to men in a drinking situation . . . a time when you felt unequal to or less than men"). As the interviewer asked broad questions, different participants would respond spontaneously in no particular order, and, unprompted, other participants would add their stories and experiences. Every participant spoke multiple times in both the HR and LR focus groups, and, as needed, the interviewer would ask follow-up questions to probe for more information about specific experiences.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

IPA (J. A. Smith, 1996) was used to analyze the focus group data because it afforded the opportunity to interpret the personal lived experiences of participants with rich detail and depth. According to J. A. Smith and Osborn (2008), the aim of IPA is to "explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (p. 53). Thus, there is an interpretive process involving two steps called a *double hermeneutic*: First, the participant makes sense of her world, and, second, the researchers make sense of the participants' responses. In using IPA, researchers use small, homogeneous samples and semistructured interviews (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). The aim of IPA is not to find meaning that can be generalized to all college students, but themes and perceptions that could clarify the picture and yield interventions that may be transferable to groups similar in culture.

 Part of ethical qualitative research is the recognition that researchers as instruments bring their own biases into the research process in how the questions are asked, what prompts are followed up on, and to what material they tend to ascribe meaning (Creswell, 2007; Hunt, 2011). As White, middle-class, educated women, we (the authors and research team members)

have to own our respective positions, lens, and cultural worldview. Our respective undergraduate experiences represented three distinct college generations and perspectives on gender messages and drinking, and all three of us describe ourselves as heterosexual.

Multiple steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data analysis. First, we identified biases through a bracketing exercise, and results were distributed to team members for cross-reference and discussed prior to IPA. To gain the most authentic perspectives of participants, I (the first author), as the interviewer, had to be aware of power differentials and had to own my biases as a substance abuse counselor, remaining aware of my own responses to questions and to the meaning I ascribed to responses in the focus group. Thus, I kept a reflexive journal of my perceptions, feelings, and thoughts following each step of the research project. All interviews were transcribed by me and then read by a team made up of the authors and another graduate student. We read each transcript independently first and coded potential themes. Then, we engaged in several meetings in which we each presented our potential themes, meaning units, and supporting participant quotes, and discussed these until we reached broad themes and subthemes. Last, an external reviewer read our journal entries and themes to check for researcher bias and representativeness. The external reviewer found that the themes were clearly reflected in the participants' responses and language and concluded that we were not biased in our interpretations of the women's experiences.

Results

Overall AUDIT scores ranged from 3 to 13 (*M* = 7.00, *SD* = 3.43), and an independent-samples *t* test yielded a significant difference between the HR and LR groups, *t*(7) = 3.94, *p* = .006, with five women classified as HR drinkers (*M* = 9.40, *SD* = 2.61) and four classified as LR drinkers (*M* = 4.00, *SD* = 0.82). There was no significant difference between mean ages of HR (*M* = 19.4, *SD* = 1.14) and LR (*M* = 20.00, *SD* = 0.96) groups, *t*(7) = –0.49, *p* = .639. GSA scores had an overall mean of 5.35 (*SD* = 0.62), with no significant difference between HR (*M* = 5.46, *SD* = 0.77) and LR (*M* = 5.22, *SD* = 0.44) drinkers, *t*(7) = 0.56, *p* = .594. Overall, GSD scores were lower than GSA scores with a mean of 4.75 (*SD* = 0.92); there was a significant difference between HR (*M* = 5.37, *SD* = 0.60) and LR (*M* = 3.97, *SD* = 0.55) drinkers, *t*(7) = 3.62, *p* = .008. Themes and subthemes from the IPA are reported in the following section.

Perceptions of GI

HR drinkers. Four themes emerged regarding perceptions of GI, how the HR women thought of themselves as women, and what it meant to be a college woman: strong female identity, lack of male role models, traditional femininity, and expecting to have it all.

Strong female identity. All HR participants endorsed taking pride in being a woman and felt energized and very positive about themselves as women. They used descriptors such as women are educated, strong, providers, and take care of things. Angela, a White senior, stated her bias:

> It just amazes me that we've lived in a world that has been run by males for so long when I just think clearly women think with a straighter head and less with their genitalia, and, while we are emotional, we tend to think through things more instead of being so hotheaded and cocky that, you know, it's all about defending your honor. I love my boyfriend and all the men in my life, but I just think women are much tougher [*laughs*].

Most of the HR women grew up with strong positive female role models. Three were raised by their mothers, two from early divorces and one whose father was often absent. They each described their mothers as strong, influential, and able to overcome adversity, resulting in the belief that women are more mature, more complete, and more in tune with themselves than men.

Lack of male role models. Most of the HR women in this group reported a distinct lack of male role models in their lives. Frances, a Black junior, explained that because her father was in the military, he was often physically and emotionally absent. As a result, her father rarely participated in any household management or parenting and could not be relied upon or trusted. Relationships with their fathers were either nonexistent or tenuous, leaving a negative effect, as Angela described:

> My dad was addicted to drugs, had all kinds of crazy problems, and I think that ruined me for a long time. I didn't trust men. My dad was so unpredictable and so detrimental to our family that he ruined my image of men for a long time. My dad and I are in a better place today, but it took a really long time to get to the point where I could trust men.

Additionally, men were described as being unavailable; the women preferred seeking help and advice from their mothers for everything. Observations of their parents shaped how they felt about women and men in general, but the gendered messages about how women should behave had been reconsidered and modified. Grace, a White freshman, shared that once she left home and could make decisions on her own, she became more independent and assertive. HR women's perceptions of GI shifted in college to become more salient.

Traditional femininity. The HR women spoke as powerful, confident feminists, yet each spent time sharing how one of their favorite parts of being a woman was maintaining their feminine appearance and the fun entailed in keeping up this image. Frances explained, "I love being a female and getting my nails done, my hair done, my makeup, my clothes, shoes, heels, bags, just everything that comes with, you know, being a female." Brianna, a White freshman, addressed the possible contradictions they voiced: "It's not like we have to do that stuff. It's just, it's what our world is used to, what we're used to growing up. It's because we like to." Grace described the fun of transforming herself by putting on her "hot girls disguise":

> Curling your hair, putting your lashes on, getting your nails done, going to the tanning salon. It's just nice to see yourself when you wake up in the morning and you look like crap, and then when you get your "hot girls disguise" on and you're like, "yeah!" [*laughter*].

Motivations for the attention given to femininity differed. Grace attributed this to her strict religious upbringing in which her self-expression was limited to a narrow gender role. Subsequently, she relished her newfound college freedom and experimented with her self-expression partly out of rebellion. For Frances, her connection between being a woman and her appearance was learned generationally, handed down from her grandmother to her mother to her.

Expecting to have it all. The HR drinkers thought balance was very important and was defined as maintaining a social life, a job, and good grades. With regard to the future, balance meant they wanted and expected to juggle a career, academics, fun social life, and traveling, and, maybe later, have kids. However, none of the women in the HR focus group mentioned the role of a partner or husband at all in these future plans. It is unclear if this omission was because of an assumption of having a partner or if this was a conscious or unconscious decision. Frances's description exemplified the women's vision:

> After I graduate, I want to be able to get out and travel, and go places. I love traveling, like I love seeing parts of places, and I think that comes along with my dad being in the military and me going, you know, living a few other places, and so I understand totally about what you're saying about getting an education and getting a career and making money and then maybe a few years later down the line and after I'm stable and I have a job and I'm ready to actually devote my time to a child, then that's when I'll be ready.

Because they believed women could and should be able to do it all, the unintended effect of being pulled in different directions culminated in feeling stress when this balance was not being achieved. Ironically, Emily, a freshman who described herself as part American Indian, described dealing with this stress and high level of expectation by drinking with friends, thereby temporarily escaping the expectations.

LR drinkers. For the LR group, three themes emerged: unfeminine self-concept, presence of male role models, and internalized messages about women.

Unfeminine self-concept. The LR college women described themselves as tomboys and unfeminine by traditional societal standards, describing personality traits like nice and caring rather than appearance. The women portrayed themselves as equals educationally and socially speaking, and they were hesitant to endorse stereotypically gendered behaviors, as Jane, a Black sophomore, described:

> Well, I was actually a tomboy growing up. I hated to do girly stuff. I didn't like to wear dresses, I hated the color pink, yellow—anything that was typically considered girly. So when I was growing up, I was pushed really hard because I grew up with

my brothers, my uncles, and all my cousins [who] were boys and I wanted to learn football and basketball and play, um, video games. And my mom was like, "You know, you can't do that. You have to be careful, don't hurt yourself." So I think it's like, it kinda made me like tougher.

The LR group defined themselves as strong, mature, and independent. Ironically, they wondered whether they might have to change their manners and appearance to be more "dateable" or attractive later. Holly, a White senior, relayed how her more masculine habits, learned from her preferred male acquaintances, were viewed as unattractive:

> I was told a lot freshman year that a lot of people didn't think they could approach me because maybe I cursed too much and/or I had really nasty jokes or I did certain things because it's like a guy, you're around guys all the time! It seems like you're, I guess, unfeminine in a certain way, like you're too much like a guy and makes you undateable or makes you kinda less attractive in that way.

Jane added an example of how her tomboy days were numbered: "I'm getting older and maybe it is time to look a little more feminine and stuff. I can't wear sweatpants forever, so I have to figure it out soon." They were conflicted about expressing themselves in their preferred way, but felt pressured to match a more traditional gendered appearance to be attractive to the opposite sex.

Presence of male role models. The LR women had exposure to strong male influences and role models in their families and reported trusting and egalitarian relationships with men. One said, as a result of bullying by girls in school: "I tend to put more trust in men rather than women, 'cause I just think they are terrible friends to have." They had meaningful relationships with their fathers, feeling special and protected as girls, and they expressed a desire to be like their older brothers and male cousins. Donna, a White sophomore, stated that she was pulled in opposite gender directions as the middle of several siblings and often felt lost:

> I have two older brothers that I just really look up to. So growing up I just wanted to be just like them. But then . . . I also have three younger sisters, so when they came along, I was always—my sister was more feminine than me and I was the oldest sister, so I kinda felt like one of the boys, but also one of the girls. Well, I mean, in such a big family you sorta get lost in the middle anyway, but I kinda don't feel like a part of either.

The LR women did not mention their maternal relationships except that their mothers pushed them to wear more feminine clothes as children. Likewise, the only specific mention of female friends in their social circles was when Holly acknowledged that, as a senior, she was intentionally seeking out social time with other women. This was clearly a novel thing for Holly, and she expressed curiosity about how it would work out. Jane mostly referred to hanging out with "the guys," and Donna referred vaguely to her theater friends, in no way distinguishing their sex or indicating its importance to her.

Internalized messages about women. The LR women described internalized messages about their GI. Some messages were direct (e.g., mothers urging

them to dress in a more feminine way), whereas others were more covert and originated from multiple sources, such as parents and peers. Messages about how they were expected to behave were often contradictory. Jane explained that messages about her sex from male relatives were confusing:

> Maybe because I hang around so many guys it does get brought to my attention so much that I'm a girl. Sometimes I feel like I have the personality of a guy or something but then when my emotions start to show in certain situations my brother might be like "stop being so girly!" Or I try to do things they do and they're like "you can't, you're a girl."

These contradictory messages from men about being feminine were especially prominent in the heterosexual dating arena. LR women perceived that men wanted a fantasy: "Guys want a girl who can like, play video games, who can be cool, be one of the guys all the time, but still they're supposed to be feminine on the outside." An ideal woman was laidback and low maintenance in her personality, but sexy and attractive in an effortless way. Donna articulated this distinction by saying, "'Cause you can act like a dude, but you know you gotta look like a girl."

Finally, the women had cultivated a notion that women were supposed to uphold a certain standard, especially in public, and that femininity equaled maturity. In drinking contexts, women were expected to be in control and accountable for their actions in a double standard that did not often apply to their male counterparts: "I can honestly say I'll be the first person to point if a girl's on the floor and she can't get up. Guys not so much; you're just like, 'he's just sloppy.'"

Themes Affecting Drinking Choices

HR drinkers. Three themes emerged for the HR drinkers regarding the impact that gender experiences and perceptions had on their drinking choices: difference between men's and women's drinking, context and amount of drinking, and safety risks.

Differences between men's and women's drinking. One difference was that, in the women's collective experience, men almost always played drinking games with the implied purpose to get drunk as quickly as possible, whereas the women drank for social bonding:

> Like whenever I see guys drink, I always see that they're trying to push the limits, you know, trying to be, like, masculine . . . [*then, in a deeper voice*] "I'm having beer and pizza and I'm watching football. Let's see how much I can drink!" And for girls, I just see that it's like, [*in a lighter voice*] "Oh my gosh, this is so much fun, let's do this together." It's more like a free environment when you're with women.

Context and amount of drinking. The HR women made their choices in drinking environments based on whether they knew the men well in the social group. Men were viewed as competitive, often encouraging women to drink more than they intended or would drink normally, and the HR women, if they knew the men, felt compelled to keep up. Frances stated,

I'm a very competitive type of person, and I don't want to feel like anybody's beating me and, um, so will try to consume more, you know. Not be the first one to tap out and say, yeah, I'm done. Yeah, I know that may be the only aspect that men might be better than me [*lots of laughter*]! With alcohol! Anything else, I can get you! So I try to do what I can to stay in it . . . [*laughs*] as long as I can.

The HR women acknowledged the biological and physiological limitations of being women and trying to drink the same quantities as their male counterparts. They wanted to be equal and competitive, but not at the expense of losing control. Sometimes they crossed the line, but they learned how to monitor their drinking as they matured. They acknowledged feeling torn about wanting to keep up, weighing whether it was worth it to emulate the men's reckless drinking choices.

Safety risks. The women agreed that safety is always a consideration when drinking around men because guys tend to push limits when they drink and, therefore, could become dangerous. They perceived an inherent risk in drinking around men as they recalled stories of being groped and leered at, especially at bars, with Emily calling the men "hawks." However, even small gatherings were not always safe, as Brianna described:

For myself, I don't drink as much when I'm with males because even if I know someone there, even if my roommate is there, even if [boyfriend's name] there—guys are guys and I've seen it myself, like, my friend's friend visited [school] and she got drunk at a party and it was mainly guys and four of us girls and—she got raped. Like just because that's how guys are. Well, that's not how guys are—but that's how some guys are when they are trying to drink and they are trying to push limits.

LR drinkers. For the LR drinkers, three themes emerged regarding the impact that experiences and perceptions had on drinking choices: resisting the college stereotype, differences in drinking environments, and making a drinking experience positive.

Resisting the college stereotype. The LR group believed that college women have earned a collective bad reputation and are expected to manipulate and behave badly. This reputation sat unfairly on the shoulders of those who did not deserve it. Jane shared,

I think it's just because more so today we don't have the best reputation anymore. I feel like when I was in middle school and high school, the guys were the players and they could do anything they wanted to, but as I started to get older those rules start to switch and you know, it's the girls dating a bunch of guys, and now it's like . . . girls can't be trusted, they're so conniving. So it's like there are starting to be more women who are cheating and just stuff like that. Basically one goes down, we all go down.

It was important to the LR group to resist perpetuating their stereotype of the "typical wild college woman" and, therefore, to avoid engaging in risky drinking behaviors. They described the "ideal college woman" as someone who blended a healthy social life and academics, someone who worked hard as opposed to women who concentrated on "foolishness." Holly added, "It's just someone who could balance everything—do well in all her courses but also partake in the college experience and be involved in the community . . . trying to help others." LR drinkers had little tolerance

for women using alcohol as an excuse or a "scapegoat" for bad behavior and instead seemed concerned with image, self-control, and accountability. Going out in public brought the possibility of running into an authority figure, so drinking moderately was of utmost importance; thus, the LR women rarely allowed themselves to be out of control.

Differences in drinking environments. The next theme addressed the differences between male and female drinking environments and public and private drinking environments. The consensus was that guys typically drink more, drink faster, and are more intent on getting drunk, as evidenced by the "blackout party" one of their male friends was throwing:

> I don't think females—I mean, we like our cutesy martinis, you know. We could be out just sipping on a nice drink, but I think guys are more there to, like, "booze it 'til you lose it!" Um, I went to a "get out or black out party," and that was, um, that was exactly what the mind-set was: "get out or black out."

The mention of men's plans to get completely obliterated elicited disbelief, sighs, and head shakes from the LR women, essentially communicating condemnation of such juvenile behavior.

Additionally, the LR women noted how guys would constantly monitor their drinking, asking for a "status report" on how many they had consumed, implying that the women should drink more. The women shared several strategies to avoid drinking, including lying, sipping the same drink slowly, and ignoring the men. It was clear that the women in the LR category were not compelled to drink as much as their male friends, acknowledging that it was unthinkable and dangerous. One said, "I never tried to keep up—I know I can't. I'm itty-bitty. I would die! I would just get alcohol poisoning." Regarding where they drank, the women agreed that the sex of the friendship group alone was not the only consideration, but that being familiar with and trusting the group accounted for whether they felt comfortable drinking. The larger a group became, the less their familiarity with the members and the less drinking they chose.

Making a drinking experience positive. The last theme surfaced as words of wisdom from the group about how to gain the most positive experience from the drinking and social scene in college. Drinking excessively did not have to be the centerpiece of the night and, practically speaking, was expensive to maintain. Dancing and meeting new people was fun in its own right and could be an empowering confidence boost, as Donna espoused:

> But I feel like the strength you find is the people you go with. Like if it's a ladies' night and you go with a bunch of girls . . . but, in the end, it's like you know we're women, we had fun, and we behaved ourselves and now were leaving. So it's kind of a cool experience.

Discussion

The HR and LR group interviews yielded accounts of drinking choices and gender identity that illustrated both commonalities and significant variations.

Despite some widespread experiences shared by all of the women, a distinct association between drinking risk level and GI emerged that informed and influenced the women's drinking choices, indicating new directions for understanding college women's drinking choices.

Themes Regarding GI

Regarding the experiences and perceptions of GI as college women, vast differences were evident between the HR and the LR drinkers. The HR women readily differentiated between men and women in terms of drinking styles, personality, and gendered expectations. For example, they strongly endorsed positive attributes of women as strong, educated, and capable, and said they loved being women compared to "boys" who were less mature and more "hotheaded." The contradiction in this is that most of the HR women were in relationships with boyfriends, and they apparently conceptualized two categories of guys—boyfriends and bad guys. In contrast, the LR group had more exposure to male friends and influences and did not view men as less than women. It was evident that they respected their fathers, brothers, and male friends and, overall, had positive relationships with them. As a result, the LR drinkers were much more hesitant initially to distinguish between men and women as groups to avoid perpetuating stereotypes. In fact, they would begin articulating a difference between how men and women were expected to behave and then would stop and argue the other side. The LR women's perceptions of men also did not include getting hit on or preyed upon like the HR group described, and they collectively painted a picture of more comfortable relationships with men.

Part of the most exceptional chasm between the groups was that the HR drinkers identified strongly with being female; all had strong positive female role models and loved what it meant to them to be women. Quantitatively, they scored significantly higher on the GSD than did the LR group. Perhaps ironically for a group of self-described independent assertive women, their definition of being a woman put a premium on traditional feminine appearance and attractiveness to men. Ideologically, they espoused feminist principles, but socially and outwardly, they could be viewed as stereotypically feminine. Aware of this paradox, they insisted that this behavior was a choice, not a result of pressure to conform to societal expectations of women.

Diverging from this view, the LR group was aware of certain standards for outward feminine appearance, but was not concerned with actual compliance with those rules. They gave several examples of others pressuring them to dress more "like a girl," but they thought of themselves as tomboys and unfeminine. They did not see femininity as a prominent part of their identity, which was supported by their lower scores on the GSD. They generally accepted themselves as women (no significant group differences in GSA scores). In fact, they tended to shy away from gender distinctions and described themselves by personality traits. This finding is

in contrast to those of Peralta et al. (2010) and Piane and Safer (2008), who suggested that women in their studies who drank more heavily endorsed more masculine traits and those who drank less were more traditionally feminine. Those outcomes could be attributed to the way GI was defined and measured, because previous studies used trait-based and personality-based gender measures that may be outdated. What was termed in previous studies as "masculine traits" may mirror what the HR drinkers referred to as being strong independent women.

Overall, the HR drinkers seemed to buy into a more stereotypical image of what a college woman should look and act like. In particular, the assumption of sexual availability because of the way women dressed had an impact on the women's perceptions. They were aware of being leered at and were even groped on occasion, but this violation was systemic and, therefore, perceived as an inevitable part of being a college woman. However, the LR women avoided stereotypical behavior by minimizing their sexual appearance so people didn't get the "wrong impression." The LR group also voiced frustration that they were victims of a collective bad reputation of college women who exhibited outrageous behavior in public places.

The HR drinkers tried to fulfill an image of an ideal woman who had it all—studious, a good student, social and involved, attractive, proud of one's appearance, and drinking to develop a rich and fulfilling social life. The culture of gendered expectations certainly appeared to play a role in influencing the HR drinkers—the more they bought into the gendered distinctions, the more they felt the need to keep up and compete with the perceived male dominant group.

A new and unanticipated finding was the difference between the HR and LR women in having strong, positive male role models growing up. It appears that the lack of male role models influenced the HR women to seek male attention, including doing so through their drinking behavior, whereas the LR women did not report this need. Having strong male role models may have encouraged the LR women to develop more self-confidence. This explanation is speculative, however, and needs to be investigated more thoroughly by future researchers.

Implications for Counselors

One of the most illuminating findings of this study is the connection between how a woman thinks of herself and her drinking risk level. Counselors who work with women who drink would be prudent to explore GI to assess motivations underlying the women's drinking choices. These gender differences in women's experiences, motivations, and needs make sense in light of Covington's (2008) work on gender-responsive substance abuse treatment, noting that the unique system of violence and sexuality contributed to women's substance abuse and that intervention was dependent on understanding this context. Counselors working with women's drinking issues can explore the gendered context of messages that may be contrib-

uting to risky drinking choices both individually and in groups to foster connection. Given that the HR women in this study felt leered at and, at times, in danger from men's sexual advances, it is important to note that Carr and Szymanski (2011) concluded that women's substance abuse may be directly and indirectly related to experiences of sexual objectification. It is no longer adequate to treat women's drinking like men's, because women face different pressures to cope with stress, maintain a feminine image, and yet keep up with the men to be attractive, often at their own peril, with dangerous consequences. Counselors can provide small groups for women to give voice to different motivations and needs that affect drinking choices; probe risk factors; and intervene on multiple levels of individual, group, system, and culture. Counselors can teach healthy coping skills, emphasize work–life balance, and advocate for addressing systemic sexual violence that contribute to women's stress. Our findings are similar to those of Young et al. (2005); HR drinkers in this study defined themselves in terms of male behavior, so there is also an opportunity to help women develop more independent self-concepts and thus reduce risk. Additionally, because women do not experience these gendered pressures in a vacuum, working with men to explore GI and drinking choices could also have great benefit and shape the broader culture of drinking. Finally, counselors might explore women's experience of male role models growing up, because this factor may have potential relevance to their drinking choices.

Limitations

We did not ask participants about sexual orientation and therefore did not distinguish sexual minorities as a subgroup; however, most of the conversation centered on heterosexual contexts, specifically how the women viewed themselves in relation to men. Because sexual identity development is prominent in college-age students, and orientation may affect one's GI, future samples with varied sexual orientation may add valuable information on this topic. In addition, although the two groups were somewhat diverse, we were not able to discern any differences by race/ethnicity with such small subgroups. Because some of the individual GI processes that have evolved are subtle and unconscious, some of the women may not have realized they had been influenced by a larger societal and social structure that was more inherently egalitarian. Therefore, the women being interviewed may not have reported the subtle influences regarding how thinking of themselves as female has affected drinking behaviors. Multiple contacts and larger samples could generate more in-depth information.

Areas for Future Research

There are numerous directions for future study to more clearly illuminate the experiences of women on college campuses with regard to drinking and GI. Potential directions include how drinking and GI differ in single-sex versus coed universities; how the media influences perceptions of drinking

and GI for college women; the role of female and male role models in shaping GI; and how the merging of sexuality, drinking, and GI affects women's perceptions of themselves. The intersection of gender with race/ethnicity also could be explored. Given the differences in reported parenting and male role models of the HR women compared with the LR women, more research exploring the relationships between these variables, GI, and drinking risk factors could be undertaken. It is clear we need more information about the depth of meaning behind women's drinking before we can apply effective specific interventions that have the likelihood of reducing HR drinking and changing the culture.

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