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## *Alcohol Use and the Fear of Weight Gain in College: Reconciling Two Social Norms<sup>1</sup>*

Recent research reports a link between diet-related behavior and alcohol abuse among women, but fails to explain this relationship. In the present study, a grounded theory approach is used to explore the link between diet-related behavior, body image, and alcohol use among a sample of college students. In the feminist tradition of “giving voice,” 78 college students participated in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to generate insight into the socio-cultural practice of diet behavior and its association with alcohol use. Four specific categories of diet-related behaviors in the context of alcohol use emerged. Students reported altering their eating and drinking patterns, self-induced purging, or exercising to stave off unwanted weight gain believed to be caused by alcohol use. These categories are useful for understanding the alcohol-use and diet-related behavior associations reported in previous studies. Results suggest drinking behavior among some college students is perhaps mutually influenced by socio-cultural pressures to conform both to body-image norms and to drinking norms. Interventions to reduce college alcohol use and the social consequences that accompany such behavior may need to take into account these social and psychological factors.

### **Introduction**

Many studies have identified risk factors associated with problematic alcohol use for women (see Wilsnack and Wilsnack 1997). Diet-related behavior has, for example, been identified as an important risk factor for alcohol-related problems among clinical samples of women (Kozyk et al. 1998; Krahn et al. 1992, 1996; Cooley and Toray 2001). To my knowledge, no studies have attempted to explain why diet-related behavior is predictive of alcohol use or abuse among women, or if this association exists for men. Exploring the diet/drinking association among college students is important for college health professionals, alcohol prevention researchers, and educators given the increasing prevalence and incidence of diet-related behaviors among both women and

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men (Hoyt and Kogan 2001; Luciano 2002) and the stability of problematic drinking behaviors among students despite college-based intervention efforts designed to reduce abusive drinking on campus (Wechsler et al. 1998).

*Background: Gender, Body Image, Diet-Related Behavior, and Alcohol Use*

While men in college continue to drink more alcohol more often compared to women, self-reported drinking rates among college women remain high (Wechsler et al. 2002). Theories of gender construction have been proposed to explain these gender differences (West 2001). Capraro (2000) argues men drink “to be men” on campus or to construct and reinforce existing normative assumptions about manhood and male behavior. McCreary et al. (1999) and others (West 2001; Cruz and Peralta 2001; Tomsen 1997) have indicated male alcohol use and alcohol problems often are associated with pressures to adhere to hegemonic masculinity standards (see Messerschmidt 1993; Connell 1995).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, alcohol use appears to be among the repertoire of behaviors men rely upon to construct masculinity (see Messerschmidt 1993; West 2001).

Historically, similar problems with alcohol at the level experienced by men largely have been absent for women (Wilsnack and Wilsnack 1996). Researchers suggest that different societal expectations for female behavior serve as protective factors and thus explain these gender differences (McCreary 1999). While empirical evidence suggests drinking is largely of the “male domain,” in general (Wilsnack and Wilsnack 1996) how gender roles influence alcohol use among male and female college students is not well researched.<sup>3</sup>

The recent proliferation of research on college alcohol use has overlooked the important association between alcohol use and diet-related behavior. Alco-

and who were more likely to report signs of alcohol use and abuse, also tended to show worsening symptoms of eating pathologies (Cooley and Tamina 2001).

In another study using a sample of college students, Cooley and Toray (2001) reported heavier alcohol use to be associated with worsening scores on bulimia. Krahn et al. (1992) similarly reported a positive association for college-aged women between alcohol use and dieting severity. In sum, research suggests as dieting severity increases, intensity and frequency of alcohol use also increases. Researchers have concluded diet-related behavior and certain alcohol- and drug-use behavior both appear to be culturally supported for adolescent women (Krahn et al. 1992).

Historically, overweight men in the United States have been tolerated rela-

students face have gone undetected in the absence of exploratory and in-depth analyses.

Few studies have employed qualitative techniques to understand the socio-contextual mechanisms associated with drinking among college students (West 2001). This research addresses these limitations directly by giving voice to students and employing the exploratory technique of grounded theory. This study does not define dieting and other weight management behaviors as “clinical eating disorders.” Instead, I incorporated college students’ beliefs as expressed by their narratives to record, document, and chronicle their experiences and views about dieting and physical appearance in relation to student drinking experiences. Narratives capture contextual nuances and reveal the meaning of college drinking in a way prevalence studies cannot.<sup>4</sup>

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Respondents were a self-selected purposive sample of 78 undergraduate students at a medium-sized state university in the mid-Atlantic region. Data were collected between 1997 and 2001. College class ranking ranged from freshmen to senior status. Students lived both on and off campus. Of the sample, 71% were White (N=55) and 26% (N=20) were Black. Two respondents were of Hispanic origin and one respondent self-described as Asian. Fifty-three per-

quantity and frequency, attitudes toward drinking, reasons for drinking, expectations of alcohol use, and consequences of drinking. The questionnaire instrument included: "What do you think of the idea of getting drunk?"; "What have been your experiences with alcohol use on this campus?"; "Do you (or do you know anyone who) diets because of their drinking?"; and "Are you concerned with the caloric content of alcohol?" Respondents were asked if they perceived gender differences for each question.

### *Analysis*

The purpose of this study was to explore issues related to drinking behaviors on a college campus. Grounded theory is the appropriate analytical technique for such a study. This technique allows respondents to inform the development of both theory and relevant hypotheses for testing in future research (see Lincoln and Guba 1985). All interviews were transcribed and coded by the author and three trained research assistants. An initial content analysis was conducted to identify patterns. After the initial analysis, a more thorough examination of the transcripts was conducted to identify emergent themes. Concepts were developed and grouped, based upon the frequency of similar articulations to substantiate emergent themes.

Once concepts were identified, inter-rater reliability was used to verify consistency in coding and interpretation. After each transcript was coded independently, the author and assistants met to identify coding and interpretation discrepancies. Assistants included a sociology professor trained in qualitative methods, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology with expertise in qualitative analysis, and an undergraduate majoring in sociology. Discrepancies involving specific concepts and themes were discussed and resolved through group consensus. The emergent themes produced through this study included: social space (Black, White, homosexual, and heterosexual space); coercion and power; gender construction; social control; and diet-related behavior.

### *Procedure*

This research was a part of a larger study on the drinking behaviors of college students. A qualitative research design was used to document participants' experiences with alcohol at a single mid-sized university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Students responded to class announcements in sociology and criminology courses and to 10 posted notices placed in campus areas frequented by students. Racial and sexual minority students were purposely over-sampled to give voice to those who have been traditionally

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**Table 1**  
**Percent of Students Who Reported Engaging in Dieting-Related Behaviors in Relation to Alcohol Use by Gender (n=78)**

	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Total</b>
Altered Eating Patterns	29.7% (11)	7.3% (3)	17.9% (14)
Altered Drinking Preferences	27% (10)	9.8% (4)	17.9% (14)
Exercising	10.8% (4)	0 (0)	5.1% (4)
Purging	5.4% (2)	2.4% (1)	3.8% (3)

to explain drinking and heavy forms of drinking. A number of students did, however, discuss “drinking to get drunk.” Concerns with body image emerged as a reason indirectly related to the “drinking-to-get-drunk” phenomenon, as illustrated by the following quote. Below, Jan’s account of why she chooses to “drink to get drunk”:

I used to not drink beer because it’s fattening and I’ve had troubles with eating so it’s just like fat is bad, so I don’t drink beer a lot. I don’t understand the concept of drinking socially. I like to drink to get drunk. I mean that is the reason, the sole reason, I am drinking. You know, I mean it tastes disgusting. I don’t like drinking at all. I don’t think I ever will like it, I don’t see a purpose of doing it socially.

Jan reports that it does not make sense for her to drink in moderation. Jan defined “drinking socially” as having a glass of wine with a meal. Drinking socially, i.e., in moderation, does not achieve the intended purpose of drinking, which is believed to be intoxication. If Jan is going to drink, she reports it is necessary to become intoxicated, else she would acquire “empty calories” without having felt the euphoria associated with heavy drinking. Jan suggests reaching the goal of intoxication and hence euphoria counterbalances the ingestion of empty calories. These sentiments were not uncommon and were expressed in the narratives that support each of the four themes described in detail below. Students’ direct experiences with these behaviors are presented first. Students’ knowledge of friends and acquaintances (responses to projective questions) are presented following accounts of personal involvement with said behaviors for each of the four emergent themes.

*Altering Eating Patterns*

Dieting is a strategy regularly used for weight maintenance (Huon and Brown 1986), yet prior research has not identified alcohol use specifically as a reason to diet. This study reveals how some men and women report dieting in response to alcohol use. Of the entire sample, 18% reported altering their eating patterns in response to alcohol use. More women in the present study (29.7%) report relying upon limiting food consumption as a solution to the problem of ingesting “high-calorie” or “empty-calorie” alcohol compared to men (7.3%).<sup>7</sup>

Some students noted eating less than usual in order to drink as much as desired without having to worry about gaining weight, while other students skipped meals altogether before a planned night of drinking. Skipping meals was a particularly attractive option, for two reasons. One, students reasoned it took less alcohol to get drunk, which translated into fewer calories ingested; second, food calories acquired through dinner, for example, were entirely avoided. The following narratives illuminate these socio-cultural practices.

Kim: We used to not eat dinner before we would go out and drink. We usually drink lite beer, and maybe if we want to get drunk more quickly we will not eat that day. It sounds really unhealthy and it does become a factor [in staying healthy]. I don't like to think I drink a ton but I don't want to gain weight from drinking.

Kim reported not eating dinner before a “party” night along with her friends in order to avoid the problem of ingesting too many calories. Her account was similar to others. The pressure to participate in alcohol-related social activities and the pressure to maintain or achieve a desired body shape informed Kim's decision to exchange her dinner plans for a night of “partying.” Tara reported similar experiences when answering a question about alcohol's caloric content: “I worry about that [alcohol use and eating]. During school we wouldn't eat the entire day and then we would go and drink.”

Men similarly expressed types of diet-related behavior discussed above. Take James, for example. A male student who aspired to work in law enforcement, he mirrored the activities and reasoning of his female counterparts documented above:

James: Yeah, I work out. It has to do with what I want to do, [which is] law enforcement. It's my career and I like to be in good shape. I don't want to be fat. I'm not a muscle head, you know, I don't use steroids to stay ripped. But in summertime, especially in summertime, I think about the calories in alcohol and avoid eating and drinking too much as [often] as I can.

Consider the following statement by Jack, a male undergraduate majoring in engineering, regarding his anxiety over the caloric content of alcohol:





These two examples are suggestive of the presence of eating disorders among college females. Unfortunately, there is no way of verifying whether or not any respondents or the friends they speak of are or have been clinically diagnosed with eating disorders. In the next section, the negotiation of drinking and body-image norms are further explored in the context of altered drinking patterns.

### *Altered Drinking Preferences*

Drinking habits are a part of college culture and are routinely controlled by many factors, including socio-cultural control agents (Peralta, 2005). Altered drinking preferences emerged as a theme because the fear of weight gain informed the question of choice of alcohol type (regular beer versus lite beer) and how much alcohol was to be used per sitting (quantity). Of the sample, 18% discussed altering their drinking patterns in response to the fear of weight gain. Primarily women (27%) reported altering their drinking patterns in their attempt to negotiate drinking pressures with pressures to conform to body shape. Nearly 10% of men acknowledged engaging in this behavior.

In terms of quantity, students reported the fear of weight gain as altering their drinking behavior in an unexpected direction. At first glance, one would think heavy drinking would be avoided due specifically to the caloric content of alcohol, especially for those men and women concerned with body image. But for some men and women the exact opposite was the case. As one female

Greg: “Recently I have been watching [my weight]. I’ve started this diet where I need to drink all lite beer. I’m not crazy about it, but you know. The guys call me “Coors Lite”, [or] “Girls Lite.”

Finally, Adam below discusses why he chooses “hard” liquor over beer:

Adam: Yes, I think about it [calories in alcohol]. I guess that’s the advantage of drinking hard liquor. It’s not as hard on the appearance of your body. I’m sure hard liquor is worse for you internally [Adam is referring here to alcohol-related health consequences] but I still do it to avoid the calories.

The calorie-percent-to-alcohol ratio of mixed drinks and lite beers compared to regular beer or other types of drinks was actively sought out by those concerned enough about body image to alter their drinking patterns. Take Meg’s account as an example of how choice of alcohol is influenced by body image concerns for acquaintances and friends of respondents: “One of my best friends went on a diet and she stopped drinking beer altogether while she was on that diet.” Another student named Amy mentioned how she would frequently “overhear” people in her dorm discuss their concerns over the caloric-content of alcohol. Choosing lighter drinks was thought to compensate for the threat of weight gain posed by partying.

Tamara: I remember one time I asked for a Sam Adams and this girl was like, “How can you drink that? It has so many calories!” Girls definitely care about what they drink and it affects me. We don’t want to gain weight.

Comparatively, most men interviewed did not report being concerned about alcohol’s caloric content enough to alter their own alcohol use. Some men,

Meg: If women are that concerned about calories, which they are, I don't think they should be drinking beer at all, because the food is going to be better for you than beer, and if you're that worried



Angie's narrative similarly illustrates the use of this diet-related behavior to negotiate the problem of weight gain caused by the social pressure to drink among friends, classmates, and college acquaintances.

Angie: I know people that exercise to make up for heavy nights of drinking. Some friends actually during the day when they know they are going to go out that night will say, "Oh, we better get our exercise in right now so we will burn calories by the time tonight comes." This [exercising] also happens the day before [planned drinking events].

While the behaviors described in this section were the least self-reported among students interviewed, many students knew of other students who engaged in these specific diet-related behaviors. The socio-cultural pressure to remain or become thin or fit, couched in a culture of alcohol use, appears to produce adaptations in students' behavior that range from modifying eating and drinking practices to using exercise and self-induced purging to rid the body of excess calories.

Women and men alike reported feeling pressure from their peers to drink. This social context represents a component of what students referred to as the "college drinking culture." Students felt this "drinking culture" was a significant aspect of their college experience. While not all students reported drinking to the point of intoxication, many students did imply that drinking implicitly meant heavy drinking.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to drinking pressures, both male and female students reported feeling pressure to maintain or construct an "ideal" body type. In the present study, 40% of students reported concern about the calories in alcohol. To be successful at meeting the demands of drinking and staying thin, students admitted to



ported negotiating the drinking and weight gain problem through exercise. These diet-related behaviors comprised the third theme emerging from the present study. Finally, nearly 4% of the sample reported using self-induced purging as a strategy to negotiate the alcohol-diet dilemma and purging behaviors do not require students to curb their eating or drinking like the first two descriptive categories. These behaviors allowed students to continue eating and drinking what they desired despite competing body image norms which may have blocked others from doing so. Concerns with body image were dealt with through exercise or purging in the time before or after drinking events. These behaviors can thus be understood as behaviors used to rid the body of excess calories acquired through alcohol use.

These data have implications for university student policies. College health professionals, college administrators, and researchers alike should consider diet-related behaviors among men and especially among women as potential risk factors for alcohol abuse. When considering prevention efforts, college counselors, coaches, and health professionals should note body image concerns may be associated with alcohol use. Moreover, students presenting with alcohol abuse problems may need to be screened for eating disorders. Finally, risks associated with under-eating or fasting before a night of partying may need to be included in educational presentations, pamphlets, and other alcohol-related material distributed to college students.

It is important to note the strengths and weaknesses of this study. Conducting qualitative research on college drinking is a valuable yet underutilized technique. This methodology allows for students to discuss at length what alcohol use means to them and what the social processes involved in drinking entail. The open-ended questioning technique and grounded theory approach used here generated data rooted directly in the experiences of students. Use of these techniques grants students the opportunity to effectively contribute to the development of empirically rooted theories about gender, diet-related behaviors, drinking and alcohol among students. The question of diet-related behaviors was not considered at the outset of the study. Pilot interviews with students revealed the importance and relevance of body-image consciousness and diet behavior to the use of alcohol. In keeping with qualitative methodology, themes concerning diet behavior in relation to alcohol use emerged on their own.

Two limitations of the present study are addressed here. First, because this was an exploratory study designed to develop theoretical constructs and to explore the meaning of alcohol use for college students and the social context of college alcohol use, purposive and non-probability sampling was used. Different experiences may be found at universities with differing populations and



locations. Our understanding of the relationship between alcohol use and diet behavior would benefit from replicating this study at other universities. Adopting representative samples would provide generalizable and more conclusive data about the association between drinking behaviors and diet-related behavior. Second, this research cannot identify the cause-and-effect relationship between dieting behavior and drinking. Did the drinking or the diet behavior emerge first, or did they develop simultaneously? Longitudinal work may reveal important patterns relevant to the etiology of drinking and dieting behavior.

As with many studies, this research produced more questions than answers. Drinking behaviors among female college students are especially important to understand given women's particular risk for physical and sexual victimization associated with alcohol use (Vicary et al. 1995; Harrington et al. 1994; Wechsler et al. 1998; Synovitz and Byrne 1998) as well as school-related and other health-related problems unique to women. Moreover, the drinking styles reported here (such as drinking "on an empty stomach") may place students, especially women, at risk for various forms of victimization and may in turn partly explain why women who use alcohol are at elevated risk for specific alcohol-related problems such as sexual assault, date rape, and rape (Vicary et al. 1995; Harrington et al. 1994; Wechsler et al. 1998; Synovitz and Byrne 1998; Bachman and Peralta 2001).

Two research questions in particular emerge from this study: (1) Are women and men who engage in the types of diet-related behavior described above at increased risk for interpersonal violence while in college given their susceptibility to higher levels of intoxication compared to those who do not diet? and (2) What is the prevalence of these behaviors in relation to alcohol use in the general population? While use of exercise and purging behaviors was less common for this sample compared to the first two categories of diet-related behavior, it is important to determine the prevalence and incidence of these behaviors for college students and people in general given the corresponding increased risk for alcohol-related and health-related consequences (e.g., bulimia and anorexia).

Finally, one of the goals behind examining the drinking experiences of students was to gain an understanding of student's general experiences with alcohol, particularly the positive and negative consequences of alcohol use. Although there is a growing body of knowledge about the prevalence and consequences of alcohol use among students (Wechsler et al. 2001), it remains unclear how the social context of the college environment influences alcohol use for students. What meaning does alcohol hold for these men and women,

and more importantly, what are the social processes involved in the use of alcohol? Are alcohol use and associated concerns with body image of concern to college students of color, and if so, how? Answers to these questions can inform the literature on alcohol use, college health, and larger sociological questions of gender and race simultaneously.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank professors Cynthia Robbins, Margaret Andersen, and Ronet Bachman for their support and guidance on all aspects of this research. I am indebted to the insight and suggestions made on drafts of this paper from J. M. Cruz, Ph.D., and P. Guerino. To Tricia Wachtendorf and Erin Gladding, thank you for all your assistance in the collection and analysis of data. For the careful and critical thought put into an earlier draft of this paper, I would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers at *Gender Issues*. And finally, I am grateful to the students who shared with me their views and experiences with alcohol use.

2. Alcohol problems include health problems, alcohol-related violence, problems with addiction, and other social problems stemming from the abuse or dependence on alcohol.

3. What is more, the narrowing gender gap in substance use has not been adequately explained. This is in part due to a lack of systematic research on the question of gender construction in substance abuse research (Johnson et al. 2001). Socio-cultural questions related to gender issues such as "dread of weight gain" may explain some of the lower rates of drinking we have seen and continue to see among college women.

4. It is important to note the question of race in this research. Future manuscripts will document systematically the racial differences emerging from the present study and their sociological implications for alcohol abuse, race relations between and among students, and differing social constructs of beauty. The majority of Black women interviewed (N=20) reported very little if any alcohol use. Further, Black women did not report engaging in any dieting-related behavior associated with alcohol whatsoever. These important racial differences speak to cultural differences as well as to the racialized space of the college campus where the study took place (see Peralta, 2005). Thus, the data presented in this paper speak to the experiences of White college student participants.

5. This may be due to the sampling technique employed and/or the face-to-face interview aspect of the present study, which differs from research designs used by large, national probability samples.

6. The prevalence of "binge" drinking reported here is far below the national figures reported in the literature. Wechsler et al. (2001) report over 40% of college students engage in risky and heavy drinking behavior. The lower rates reported here may be an artifact of the sample. It is unknown whether students who engage in heavier drinking practices engage in more diet-related behaviors.

7. "High-calorie" and "empty-calorie" were terms used by students to describe alcoholic beverages.

8. Greg's reference to "Girls Lite" refers to the gendered nature of alcoholic beverages. "Lite beer" connotes a female beverage because women are expected to be more concerned with body image than are men. Despite the fact that Greg admits to drinking lite beer, his narrative suggests men who drink lite beers are a contradiction in terms, as men are not supposed to consume beverages meant for women and are hence susceptible to ridicule.

9. Four or more drinks for women, five or more for men has been defined as "binge" drinking for students in the college student alcohol use literature (see Wechsler et al. 2001).

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