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College Student High-Risk Drinking as a Maladaptive Serious Leisure Hobby

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The purpose of this grounded theory study was to examine the experiences of college students who defined themselves as high-risk drinkers in order to understand the meaning and purpose that engagement in such a leisure occupation held for them. Individual open-ended interviews were conducted with four male and four female participants (aged 21 to 27). The findings revealed an emergent grounded theory indicating high-risk drinking adheres to the Serious Leisure Perspective of a hobby developed by Stebbins (2007). Six themes found within the data substantiate this conceptualization. The participants had a long-term time investment with drinking, developed special skills through sustained effort, solidified a unique identity as a hobbyist, found deep meaning and purpose through the hobby, and performed the hobby within a unique and special world in concert with other hobbyists. Their high-risk drinking provided structure and a sense of belongingness within the larger university context.

KEYWORDS alcohol, college students, lifestyle balance, maladaptive habits, serious leisure, substance abuse, university students

INTRODUCTION

Each year approximately 17 million young adults attend colleges and universities throughout the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007) in anticipation of entering into a career of their choice. The abuse of alcohol is a widespread public health concern on campuses, however, which places college students at risk psychologically, cognitively, and
physiologically. The 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2003) found that 18- to 25-year-olds had the highest rate of high-risk drinking for the United States (41.6%); within this group, full-time university students had higher rates of high-risk drinking than did non-students. As many as 44% of university students describe themselves as occasional high-risk drinkers and another 23% say they are frequent high-risk drinkers (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2007, 2008; Wecshler et al., 2002). High-risk drinking (also known as binge or excessive drinking) is defined to be 5 drinks for males and 4 drinks for females on one occasion. This drinking practice poses challenges to a student’s role performance, well-being, and health (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2004). Students experience high rates of negative consequences related to alcohol ranging from unprotected sexual activity to injury (Wechsler et al., 2002). Additionally, there is a strong correlation between high-risk drinking and university attrition (Jennison, 2004). Tragically, in 1998 almost 1450 university students died from an alcohol-related injury (Hingson, Heeren, Zakocs, Kopstein, & Wechsler, 2002).

Psychological deficits associated with substance abuse include a person’s inability to manage time and stress, cope with anxiety, develop self-identity and self-esteem, and gain self-confidence through mastery of typical work, educational, self-care or leisure occupations, and interpersonal relationships (Riley, Ramsey, & Cara, 1998). There are also concerns related to long-term and short-term memory impairment, sensorimotor deficits secondary to neuropathies, inadequate nutrition, poor physical endurance, and general deconditioning. Chronic use of alcohol may lead to osteoporosis, cirrhosis of the liver, pancreatitis, cardiopulmonary disorders, central nervous system disorders such as Wernicke–Korsakoff syndrome, emotional disorders such as anxiety or suicidality, or even fetal-alcohol syndrome among children born to a woman of child-bearing age (Doweiko, 2002; Gutman, 2006). Furthermore, safety issues and impaired judgment need to be addressed secondary to increased risk-taking behaviors (Moyers & Stoffel, 1999). The scope of practice for occupational therapy promotes assisting persons with substance abuse disorders to undertake and maintain change in all of these areas during intervention sessions (Buijsse, Caan, & Davis, 1999; Kwitny, 1998; Stoffel & Moyers, 2004; Wand, 1998; Yaeger, 2000).

The negative consequences of collegiate high-risk drinking patterns are well documented (Jennison, 2004; Park, 2004; Sullivan & Wodarski, 2004). The ACHA-NCHA (2007) reported that while drinking, students sometimes did something they regretted (35.5%), forgot what they did (29.8%), were injured physically (18.2%), or had unprotected sex (13.9%). Wechsler et al. (2002) found similar rates of negative consequences such as experiencing vandalism (10.7%), trouble with police (6.5%), injury (12.8%), driving while intoxicated (29%), missing assignments (21.6%), and missing classes (29.5%).
Singleton (2007) also found a negative correlation ($r = -0.26$) between the amount of alcohol consumed and both the semester and the cumulative grade point average (GPA). There was also a smaller negative correlation ($r = -0.16$) between GPA and frequency of alcohol consumption.

LEISURE AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Leisure is considered to be a basic area of daily human occupation deemed necessary in order for a person to experience a sense of overall well-being, creativity, and socialization (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2008). Leisure is conceptualized as one of the six areas of human occupation (activities of daily living, work, education, spirituality, sleep, and instrumental activities of daily living) and regarded as equally important as the other five (AOTA, 2008). Leisure, however, is a complex and compelling phenomenon and a standard definition of leisure remains elusive. Leisure has been described as a subjective experience (Connolly & Law, 2005; Lobo, 1999; Passmore, 2003; Primeau, 1996.) To simply state that a certain activity is categorically a leisure activity is nearly impossible since between-individuals labeling reveals that the same activity can be classified as leisure by one individual and as work by another. Even within-individuals, an activity may be classified as leisure at one point in time, but may not be considered to be leisure at a later time.

Outside of the field of occupational therapy, the search for a compelling definition of leisure also is debated. Iso–Ahola (1999) portrayed leisure as a “social phenomenon” (p. 40) experienced only in those activities that allow a person to feel autonomy, intrinsic motivation, a sense of having a prerequisite set of skills to meet the challenges required to do the activity, or a desire to reach the required skill level, control over the level of socialization which occurs during the experience, and a chance to seek a desired level of arousal (either over-stimulation or relaxation). Kelly (1983) asserted that leisure occupations provide a context to express a personal identity and develop friendships.

SERIOUS LEISURE PERSPECTIVE

Stebbins (1982, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007) has spent almost 30 years developing his conceptualization of a leisure framework, now termed the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP). SLP encompasses three distinct types of leisure: project-based leisure, serious leisure, and casual leisure (Stebbins, 1997). Casual leisure is defined as pursuits which offer an immediate but relatively short-lived pleasure, and require no special training or skills to engage in the occupation. Serious leisure is more substantial than casual leisure. The adjective serious is intended to depict a sense of the importance
the occupation holds for the individual, rather than to describe a sense of sternness or gravity. Serious leisure is best summarized as:

[A] systematic pursuit of . . . a core activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience. (Stebbins, 2007, p. 5).

The idea of a leisure career depicts the progression of responsibilities held by the individual within the realm of the leisure role. The career is thought to have four distinct stages: initiation, development, maintenance, and decline (Stebbins, 2007). Through the course of the participant’s career with the hobby, a special lifestyle develops around what has become the participant’s central life interest in the leisure occupation. In essence, a subculture arises which is known to the participants and provides them with special norms, values, beliefs, styles of performance, and morals associated with the central life interest. While there may be a club or group associated with the leisure, the subculture is not necessarily institutionalized.

Stebbins (2004) divided serious leisure into three main categories: amateurs, career volunteers, and hobbyists. To meet the definition of a hobby in SLP, the activity being performed must meet six key characteristics (Stebbins, 2007). The activity must present the person with opportunities to: (1) persevere, (2) develop a leisure career, (3) make a significant effort based on a skill, knowledge, or training, (4) achieve durable benefits, (5) identify with the activity and the other participants, and (6) develop a unique ethos or social world connected to the activity. Finally, the pursuit has to be an activity that produces a positive outcome for the individual. Such a positive outcome would further lead the person to experience a degree of personal development and achieve an optimal experience. Serious leisure hobby studies have investigated the experiences of barbershop singers (Stebbins, 1996), contract bridge players (Scott & Godbey, 1994), football fans (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnack, 2002; Jones, 2000), and quilters (Stalp, 2006).

There are, however, concerns when a person engages in a leisure occupation which holds meaning and purpose for the participant and provides an optimal experience, yet it would be considered to be outside the typical sociocultural norms (Stebbins, 2007). Such leisure occupations might be considered by outsiders to be deviant or maladaptive due to a compulsive or addictive involvement by the participant. This concept of uncontrollability is defined as the tendency of the “avocation to get out of hand” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 263). The desire to do the activity usurps involvement in other interests, even if there is insufficient time or money for the participant to engage in the hobby. In some cases, the growing intensity of participants’ attention to and anticipation of the rewards they will achieve from
the serious leisure pursuit may fracture their other role requirements in work, interpersonal relationships, or, even their overall health and well-being. For instance, as one participant in a study of dog show enthusiasts noted, “a lot of people think you are crazy” because of the extreme investment of time and money by the participants in the hobby (Baldwin & Norris, 1999, p.13). Engagement in serious leisure occupations was also found to place athletes or fans of athletics at risk for alienating their family and work relationships because of their intense devotion to their hobby (Gibson et al., 2002; Goff, Fick, & Oppliger, 1997; Hill & Robinson, 1991).

A search of the literature revealed only one prior study which investigated college drinking as leisure, and the authors concluded it should be classified as casual leisure (Shinew & Parry, 2005). The study was limited, however, because data were collected only about the number of days per week engaged in drinking, not about the amount of time per day or level of commitment the subjects devoted to the pursuit. Shinew and Parry believed that such information might have indicated the subjects spent a significant percentage of their daily lives engaged in this pursuit over a longer period of time “which is another indication of a serious rather than casual pursuit” (2005, p. 371).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This qualitative study aimed to investigate the meaning and purpose of collegiate high-risk drinking as a leisure occupation among eight students at a large urban Midwestern university. The research questions which guided this explanatory study were:

1. What were the life experiences, and social and environmental contexts surrounding the time when the participant university student initially engaged in drinking alcohol?
2. What were their current life experiences, and social and environmental contexts as they engaged in high-risk drinking?
3. What did high-risk drinking mean to them? What was the purpose?
4. How did engagement in high-risk drinking affect their performances in other meaningful occupations of their daily lives?

METHOD

Grounded theory methodology was used in order to capture the participant’s expression of his or her experiences related to engaging in the high-risk drinking (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). The study followed guidelines provided by Charmaz (2006) to increase the credibility of the
study, such as using theoretical sampling to ensure a spectrum of participants, integrating a dynamic process for collecting and analyzing data by using a constant comparative analysis method, constructing analytic codes and categories, memoing to further define the properties and relationships of the categories, and allowing the theory to emerge from the participants’ voices.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, several essential strategies were incorporated, such as provision of as many direct quotes as possible to further illustrate the emergent themes, maintenance of a verifiable audit trail, triangulation of data sources, use of multiple analysts, and seeking participant feedback through member checking (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007).

After securing Human Subjects Institutional Review Board approval, volunteers were sought through posted flyers and an advertisement in the campus newspaper. Inclusion criteria required that participants be full-time students between 21- and 29-years of age, be able to verbally describe experiences with high-risk drinking, and score ≥8 points on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (Babor, Higgins–Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001). The AUDIT is a simple, self-report clinical screening tool to identify levels of alcohol usage. A score of 8–15 indicates hazardous or harmful alcohol use, and a score of ≥16 indicates a higher level of alcohol abuse. The AUDIT has a Cronbach coefficient alpha of .80 to .86 and the reliability and validity are considered satisfactory (Babor et al., 2001). The AUDIT is appropriate in research with college students (Conigrave, Saunders, & Reznik, 1995; O’Hare, 2005; O’Hare & Sherrer, 1999).

Participants

After preliminary telephone interviews to determine adherence to the inclusion criteria, participants signed an informed consent form, chose a pseudonym, and completed the AUDIT and a biographical data sheet. Nine volunteers initially met the full inclusion criteria and were scheduled for individual interviews. For unknown reasons, one did not arrive, thus, the participants were 8 adults (equal genders) made up of 2 graduate and 6 undergraduate students. One woman was married, one man was in a steady relationship, and the other six were single. All were Caucasian; seven were Americans, and one was an international student from South America. Their ages ranged from 21–27 years, with an average age of 23.4 years. Two of the men and one of the women were on athletic scholarships. One woman was a member of a non-residential sorority. The participants’ majors included psychology, communications, science, liberal arts, and business. Their AUDIT scores ranged from a low of 8 to a high of 17, with an average score of 12.38. Table 1 summarizes the pertinent demographic information about the participants.
Data Collection

All of the individual interviews were conducted in a quiet and private office setting, following a semi-structured interview guide and lasted approximately 1–2 hours. The participants received a $25 gift certificate to the campus bookstore as an incentive. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Once the transcriptions were proofread for accuracy the tapes were destroyed. All paperwork was stored in a locked file cabinet and the documents will be shredded three years after the conclusion of the study.

Data Analysis

Data for this qualitative research project included (a) demographic data, (b) AUDIT scores, (c) transcripts from the interviews, and (d) field notes made during and after each interview. Member checking was planned and the participants were contacted to review the findings; however, only one responded. She stated she concurred with the findings and they were consistent with her beliefs and experiences.

In keeping with grounded theory methodology, comparisons within the data began immediately after the first interview in order to guide subsequent interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). As suggested by Charmaz (2006), the analysis was directed at an incident level to name the processes or actions described by the participants. Two additional expert checkers (both occupational therapy faculty with qualitative research experience) also analyzed the data independently. Next, a group meeting was held to discuss all interpretations and the findings were grouped together to develop categories. A matrix was created as an analytical device to outline the conditions and consequences that clustered together in the participants’ stories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Memos of ideas were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>College year</th>
<th>Athlete</th>
<th>Time of 1st alcohol use</th>
<th>AUDIT score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11th grade</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skyler</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11th grade</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001)
Scores ≥8 points indicate a problem drinker.
written in a free-association style. The data were initially analyzed using two
types of concurrent coding techniques: initial and focused coding. The
development of codes occurred after the categories and their relationship
became clearer. The categorizations were integrated further and refined to
produce more than a simple listing of themes. All of the research analysts
self-identified their biases and discussed them in the group meetings.

FINDINGS

Stebbins (2007) outlines six central characteristics to define a leisure pursuit
as a serious leisure hobby. Table 2 correlates the six characteristics of a ser-
ious leisure hobby with the corresponding themes which emerged from the
data. The analysis led to an emergent grounded theory that collegiate
high-risk drinking can be defined as a maladaptive SLP. The participants’
depiction of the meaning and purpose of their high-risk drinking fits within
Stebbins’ description of the rewards that are associated with maladaptive ser-
ious leisure, namely the development of “a special personal identity
grounded, in part, in the unique genre of self-enrichment that invariably
comes with inhabiting any marginal social world” (2007, p. 66). Previous
authors proposed that drinking alcohol is a form of casual leisure because
it provides only immediate intrinsic rewards during a relatively short-lived
engagement with the event and requires little or no special training to per-
form the occupation (Shinew & Parry, 2005; Stebbins, 1997, 2007). The part-
icipants in this study, however, have described high-risk drinking as a leisure
occupation which required extended involvement and provided them with
rewards which went beyond simple relaxation, enjoyment, or sensory stimu-
lation. Thus, an argument can be made to define high-risk drinking as a
maladaptive serious leisure hobby.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The six qualities of a serious leisure hobby</th>
<th>High-risk drinking as a maladaptive serious leisure hobby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The hobbyist progresses through stages of a leisure career</td>
<td>1. High-risk drinking occurs over a long-term time frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hobbyist demonstrates perseverance</td>
<td>2. High-risk drinking takes time and effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hobbyist develops personal effort, knowledge, and skills</td>
<td>3. High-risk drinking takes talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hobbyist achieves durable benefits</td>
<td>4. High-risk drinking has meaning and purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hobbyist creates a strong allegiance</td>
<td>5. High-risk drinking defines me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hobbyist finds a unique ethos</td>
<td>6. High-risk drinking has a world of its own</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Category One: The Hobby is Long-Term

The participants in this study described their trajectory path of being involved with high-risk drinking as having a career with three stages. The stages were initiation, establishment, and, what they forecast would be the eventual final decline phase of the hobby which would occur post-graduation.

For all the participants in this study, the initiation path to the high-risk drinking hobby occurred before they reached 21-years-old. Two distinct times for the initiation became evident. Five of the eight started drinking in secondary school, but the other three delayed the onset until the summer after high school graduation or in the early weeks of their freshman year. For all eight the moment occurred spontaneously and they enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to try drinking. In this early stage of their drinking hobby careers, the participants were unconcerned about what they were drinking, and accepted whatever was available.

For the five participants who were initiated in secondary school, the event occurred with the encouragement of older friends or siblings who provided the alcohol, the opportunity, and direct guidance. It occurred at a house party in a home and the context provided them with a sense of security. They simply accepted the opportunity to try alcohol, and blithely consumed whatever was offered to them without hesitation. None of the participants expressed any concerns about being caught by parents or other authorities during their initiation. They recalled it as a pleasant memory:

Adam: [It was] sophomore year of high school… A couple of girls who went to the game were just like, “Well there’s a party tonight after, so come out.” I was like, “Ok. Why not?”

Walter: I was probably 13 or 14… We got the stuff from my dad’s bar. (Laughs). My parents weren’t home… everybody was drinking. I just did it to fit in with them at that time, cuz they were a little bit older than me.

John: When I was 18, we were in my buddy’s basement… somebody brought that bottle. So we were just all like, “OK! Let’s do this and see what happens.”

The three participants who delayed their initiation until after high school indicated this was primarily due to external forces, such as religious affiliations, involvement in sports, or fear of discovery by authorities. For these three (Renee, Veronica, and Beth), the initiation occurred in a more public context and without the presence of trusted older peers or siblings. Unlike the earlier onset group, they recalled the experience with a sense of unease. They were also more cognizant of possible negative outcomes. Interestingly, the three later-onset participants also had the three lowest AUDIT scores.
Both the novice college drinkers and the more experienced high school drinkers quickly discovered the central role alcohol played in transitioning to campus life and in developing a social connection with other students. They suggested that not only did their peers have an automatic expectation that they would drink, but they also expected a college freshman would already be a seasoned drinker. The more experienced drinkers found a sense of freedom in their new life style at college and social opportunities.

Walter: From the very first week on campus, I started drinking and having more fun and meeting more people! I’d definitely say the alcohol was important to getting into things at college.

Renee: You come to college and you’re around older people and you know, they pay attention to you and you just start drinking. It’s kinda more peer pressure. I remember I was at a club and I didn’t get ID’d, and—man—they kept giving ‘em to me and I just kept taking ‘em! I was very trashed...

The participants next moved into a stage where they established routines, habits, and specific contexts in which they engaged in high-risk drinking. They determined which alcohol they liked best to drink, learned how to tend to a hangover, and organized their daily or weekly schedules to allow a maximum amount of free time to devote to the hobby.

Adam: I start thinking about partying about as soon as I wake up on Friday, (laughs) and that is my main focus of getting Friday over with (laughs).

Veronica: I would say it wasn’t addiction, but it was on the daily basis...at least a beer every day.

Skyler: By the time I got to be 17, 18, then it was all about going out and drinking.

The participants voiced an expectation that their involvement in the hobby will decline once they graduate. They felt entitled to be irresponsible as long as they are students, but they envisioned that upon graduation it will be necessary for them to stop high-risk drinking. They believed there is a difference between college life and the “real world.” Walter summed it up with this statement about his looming graduation: “That’s life—this is college.” It is also seen in Monica’s declaration: “It’s not as cool to see someone in their 40s going out and getting trashed like college kids!”

Category Two: The Hobby Takes Time and Effort

The participants highlighted several situations in which their hobby of high-risk drinking required them to persist despite hardships. Through perseverance and overcoming obstacles, the study participants strengthened
their positive expectancies about their drinking hobby. The need to persevere despite barriers must be present in order meet Stebbins’ (2007) definition of a SLP, such as the hobbyist needs to have overcome obstacles in order to realize just how important the leisure pursuit is for him or her. The participants identified things they had given up in order to have time to engage in the high-risk drinking hobby such as intimate relationships, other hobbies like golfing or skateboarding, and time with friends and family.

All of the participants described events when they had to overcome physical risk in order to continue engaging in their hobby. But, in the spirit of downplaying and romanticizing their recollections, they minimized the danger they experienced and emphasized the “fun” that had occurred instead. For example, Monica discussed experiencing a hospitalization related to excessive drinking, “I got alcohol poisoning at a party… I don’t even know how much I drank, just bottles and bottles of stuff. It was pretty serious; I was taken to the hospital.” She further explained that this event led her friends to stop drinking because of the fear they experienced while she was being treated in the hospital. Ironically, she did not stop drinking because she had no recollection of it and was therefore not frightened by the experience. Her solution was to seek out a new set of friends who did not know her history, and would therefore still drink with her.

Skyler also described experiencing a blackout, or loss of consciousness, while inebriated. He acknowledged that he was scared when he awoke and was unable to account for eight hours of his life. Again, however, he rationalized the negative consequence by implicating the type of alcohol he was drinking, rather than accepting responsibility for drinking too much. His solution, which allowed him to persevere in the hobby, was to no longer drink shots and now he only drinks hard liquor in mixed drinks.

The high economic cost of purchasing alcohol was another barrier the participants had overcome through a variety of strategies. For example, they would drink at home prior to going out (termed “pre-gaming”), or settled for less expensive or less desirable brands in order to save money. Two of the men worked as bartenders in order to get free or discounted drinks. One of the men thought women could save money by drinking in bars because men would purchase drinks for them. They were all fully aware of how much the hobby cost financially. Asked how much they spent per week, they said:

Walter: About $60 a week.
Skyler: …if you drink at home you can, you know, get 12 beers for $8–9. If you go out and you try to buy 12 beers and it’s what? Like $36.
John: …there have been times where I would spend a $100 on a night. But usually on average, I’d say $30 at a bar—$30–$40 on a Saturday night.
Category Three: The Hobby Takes Talent and Skill

The participants had spent approximately six years engaged in their hobby. They believed their ability to drink ever-increasing quantities of alcohol was a symbol of their increased skills, gained through daily practice in the hobby. They became connoisseurs of the tastes of different alcohols and knew what physical effects to expect from different types and quantities of alcohol. They took pride in being “an experienced drinker” and believed they knew strategies to keep from getting too drunk, such as by pacing themselves. In actuality, what they were describing was an increased tolerance to the effects of alcohol, which allowed them to consume greater quantities than they could at the beginning of their hobby career.

With experience, the participants came to develop drinking savvy and knew what combinations of alcohol produced desirable positive sensory changes and which ones should be avoided. They also knew the most cost-effective way to achieve inebriation. They were fairly selective in the drinking preferences, except if the drinks were free, and then selectivity was forgotten.

Monica: There’s one drink that I like that we mix it with um, pineapple juice, vodka, and grenadine. If we are making it ourselves at home it would have a lot more than 2 shots (laughs). At the bar I would usually drink 4 or 5 of those. Occasionally, I’ll mix wine with that, but I don’t really mix wine often with liquor... I don’t like beer and so if I’m at a bar I usually don’t drink it unless I don’t have a choice and it’s bought for me—then I’ll drink it. Drinking is expensive, definitely.

Veronica: For us, we like red wine, so we always have red wine

Skyler: Different alcohols do different things. So, I guess I like beer, too, for the fact that my buzz is nice and mellow. And, I can still be myself and still speak good, not really feel like “drunk drunk.” Where if I have tequila and vodka, then I just either pass out or throw up [inaudible] if I have too much, and so that’s another reason why I stick to beer.

Renee: Usually I start with a draft beer. It’s really cheap. I’ll have a couple beers and then I also drink a drink called Twisted Apple. And sometimes...we do Cherry Bombs and Grape Bombs...and sometimes I’ll like a Long Island Ice Tea or Amaretto Sours.

The participants described having familiar and cherished objects to enhance the context of their hobby. Veronica brought a special corkscrew, wine glasses, a cheese board and a special knife from her home country because the objects were part of her rituals of drinking. Skyler had a special Pilsner glass to drink his beer, whereas his roommate favored a thick mug.
The participants used verbal and non-verbal signals to draw other hobbyists into participating in the hobby. When partying together, covert protocols guided a group to cohesively engage in the hobby. Various catch phrases were used to signal to each other that they were actively starting to play the hobby. These rituals provided continuity through a sequence of actions that carried over from one event to the next.

Renee: I have a motto: “No one leaves this place without doing a shot!”
(Laughs).

Monica: ...[our] phrase is: “Drink, bitch!” (Laughs) if I say it to her, she has to drink.

Adam: I’d say—“Get after it!” or “Time to get after it!”

Category Four: The Hobby Has Meaning and Purpose

The participants related their past experiences with the hobby primarily in a positive manner and indicated they had many meaningful and pleasant memories of past events. This positive outcome motivated them to continue with the hobby in order to achieve the pleasant experience once more. They also admitted, however, that they often altered or reframed what were actually negative occurrences into positive memories. Overall, the participants identified several primary reasons for engaging in the hobby, such as, stress reduction, finding a sense of belongingness and shared memories with other hobbyists, and seeking sensory/cognitive changes. For all eight participants, the number one reason for being involved with the hobby was for enjoyment, pleasure, amusement, or as many of them called it, just plain “fun.”

Adam: It’s just a way to get together with a lot of your friends and ... having fun.

Veronica: If you have anything [any liquor available]—you can have a celebration.

Walter: I’m definitely going out to get drunk. That’s the whole point.
(Chuckles). For me just drinking is fun, so... It’s always good times going out.

Skyler: I just think it’s fun to drink. I think it feels good, it’s relaxing.
You want to just kick back and have fun.

They also sought relaxation through alcohol because their weekly routine had been too harried and pressured. In these situations, they had a goal to forget their problems when they were drinking.

Renee: I just feel really like, I know it sounds weird but, liberated. I know it doesn’t solve my problems, but I feel like at that time... I can deal with my problems and I can let loose and I don’t have
to, like live in the moment. I’m not worried about what’s gonna happen tomorrow, or my test on Monday, or finding a job, or whatever.

Skyler: If I’m stressed out about something—2 or 3 beers and—[voila] no stress!

The participants also saw the hobby as a way to be with like-minded individuals. They did not feel judged or scrutinized about their drinking habits when they were with other hobbyists and they felt accepted and validated. As Beth succinctly stated, “People don’t want to be drunk with a sober person.” They felt the hobby increased the depth and breadth of their relationships with others. In reality, however, only two of the eight had romantic relationships at the time of the interviews. This lack of having a significant other might explain why the other participants held strong feelings of kinship with other hobbyists. Conversely, it might be that they did not develop significant intimate relationships because they were so deeply connected to their drinking hobby friends. In any case, they felt supported by the other hobbyists and would assist one another if the situation required it. Many stressed the social connections and heightened sense of interdependence with their friends while drinking.

Monica: Any negative situation creates bonds—and when you throw in heavy drinking there’s always some sort of negative situation! You know, somebody drinks way too much and is really trashed and you need to take care of them.

Walter: I definitely drink to build camaraderie, ah, it’s a lot more fun.

Skyler: ...if I go out I know 20 people at the bars and clubs.

A durable benefit achieved through the hobby was the creation of lasting memories, even if the memories were filtered through an alcohol-tinged lens. As Monica acknowledged, though, the oral history of her group of friends is often recalled in a false manner: “It always turns out funny, I mean it may be really serious at the time but it will get brought back up later as a joke.” Others echoed this idea:

Walter: We just try to have fun for the night and if fun becomes a memory, then ... you think back and kind of laugh.

John: I regret some things that I have done, but for the most part when you look back at those things with your friends you, you just laugh like “oh, I was drunk, you know.”

The participants clearly described their positive expectations about how the alcohol would alter their mood, decrease their inhibitions, and alter physical abilities and sensation. They were keenly aware of the physical
and cognitive affects brought on for them by the alcohol. Skyler could clearly depict the continuum of his levels of inebriation:

...[With] the first 2 or 3 drinks, you’ll get a nice “happy go lucky” kind of buzz, you know, where you are real friendly and you talk about whatever. [Then] inhibitions start going down the drain, boy, you really let loose, and talk to anybody, you know, a pretty girl across the bar... But then by the 5th one on, then it is kinda like the buzz getting worse and worse, cuz now you are getting more drunk, now you are getting more slurred...

Category Five: The Hobby Defines Me

The participants’ relationship with drinking was not fleeting or mundane; rather, it became a primary daily occupation for them. Through this ever present engagement with the hobby, they now defined themselves as possessing certain characteristics or traits that were shared with and known to other hobbyists. They had preconceived expectations about what non-hobbyists would be like as well.

Walter: ...people who don’t drink, they don’t get out as much, they don’t meet as many people, they kind of keep to themselves, they’re not as outgoing, they, you know—I think they miss out on, you know, what college really is.

Several participants voiced that the integration of alcohol into the social situations was so ingrained that if people were not drinking alcohol the only likely explanation could be that they were ill. As Veronica said, “…If you are drinking a soda or juice then, “Oh my god—what’s going on with you?” That would be unusual behavior!”

Skyler told a story that highlighted how his hobby defines himself to such a degree that he had difficulty relating to people who did not participate in high-risk drinking. He was on a date when he found himself in the following situation:

Skyler: I didn’t know much about the girl, obviously, cuz it was a first date. And we went to a bar and I ordered a Long Island Iced Tea, and I asked her if she wanted one, and she’s like, “I don’t even drink” [incredulous tone] so I’m like “oh, okay, that’s great.” [Laughs.] So we got her a Pepsi. We never went out again.

Category Six: The Hobby Has a World of Its Own

The shared attitudes, beliefs, values, and trials and tribulations of the high-risk drinking hobby created a special world for the participants. They
viewed high-risk drinking as a benign and fun-filled activity. Because it was done most often with other hobbyists, they received validation of this viewpoint from the other hobbyists which further reinforced their convictions that what they were doing was normal. Recognizing, understanding, and enacting the unwritten rules (or code of conduct) of being a hobbyist was necessary to effectively engage in this hobby. This included knowing the acceptable levels of inebriation, maintaining personal safety, and feeling proud that they could still meet their other obligations to school, work, or family.

They were also able to articulate the levels at which a hobbyist would be acceptably drunk versus unacceptably drunk. The code of conduct existed for each participant, but was not universally defined; rather, each participant's unique code guided his or her own behavior. One common standard though, was that it was not acceptable to be obnoxious, or to be aggressive while drunk. The most desirable type of inebriation seemed to be one wherein the person was happy, talkative, and still able to converse with others. To be an obnoxious drunk, or out of control drunk, was not tolerated, but to be a giddy drunk was to be pleasant and talkative.

The hobbyists were also aware of the potential physical or legal repercussions from mixing alcohol with driving. They believed they had strategies in place to manage this eventuality, such as naming a designated driver at the beginning of the evening, taking cabs, or walking home from a bar. In reality, however, their attempts often went awry, and the designated driver would renge on the agreement halfway through the evening.

The female participants were also aware of the dangers posed by being inebriated with strangers in a bar or walking home from a bar at night. They developed strategies to decrease their vulnerability, such as creating a buddy system to watch out for one another, or going out in groups. Beth even considered the potential danger of someone slipping something into her drink.

Beth: I always, personally, like to keep track of myself, I think as a woman you have to. If you’re getting more drunk than your date, then, things could go verrry wrong, verrrry quickly by the end of the night.

Since a large part of the attraction of the special world of the high-risk drinking hobby involved group interaction and socialization, the participants typically congregated at parties or at bars. The definition of a desirable bar was one that had close proximity for walking home, good music, cheap drinks, pool tables, and interesting patrons.

DISCUSSION

The participants’ portrayed their high-risk drinking in a manner consistent with Stebbins’ (2007) definition of a SLP. While the participants’ depiction
of their performance in this hobby may appear unflattering or dangerous to the reader, the participants did not express shame or regret about their drinking experiences. From an outsider’s perspective, however, such as a health care provider, the risks associated with alcohol abuse would indicate the hobby is a maladaptive SLP (Stebbins, 2007).

The participants portrayed their hobby as one which holds a deep sense of meaning and purpose for them, and one that went beyond providing simple fun or sensory pleasure. They perceived it to be an acceptable and harmless hobby, which reinforced their sense of self, and gave purpose to their choice to drink alcohol. They enjoyed the traditions, oral history, and rituals they shared with other hobbyists. Additionally, they fine-tuned their abilities to maximize their performance in the hobby, to the point where they knew which alcohols were the most enjoyable and what sensory effects to anticipate. They were adept at managing their schedules and their finances to ensure maximum availability to frequently interact with other hobbyists. They maintained a carefree and casual attitude about their high-risk drinking hobby which they believed was contextually and temporally defined. They also believed that their excessive drinking would diminish as a natural course of events once they transitioned from college to the “real world” post-graduation. They thought they had realistic action plans to decrease any potential negative consequences such as physical harm, although they often did not carry through with their intended precautions, such as having an assigned designated driver. They considered the hobby to be fun, and framed even negative events as opportunities to increase their connectedness with fellow high-risk drinkers. Overall, they expressed a desire for camaraderie and some claimed the social opportunities were their primary motivators to drink. In actuality, it appeared to be just the opposite: becoming inebriated was the primary goal for the occupational performance, but it was disguised as a social opportunity. Overall, they were primarily compelled by positive personal expectations and a sense of adventure to discover the effects of alcohol.

Like most alcohol abusing college students, however, the participants in this study had not been formally diagnosed with any substance abuse disorder, nor had they yet experienced a serious consequence while inebriated. Therefore, they had a strong sense of denial about both their personal responsibility in drinking and the potential consequences of their actions. Despite their high-risk drinking hobby, the participants were successful in having completed at least three years of college at the time of their interview. What is not known through this study, though, is the point of view of college students who were high-risk drinkers but had not continued with their college career. The participants’ belief that their hobby of high-risk drinking, however, is a pleasurable leisure occupation which has few hazards contrasts starkly with the evidence offered by previous research studies (ACHA, 2007, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2002). Since health care professionals, counselors, or
administrators who advocate for prevention or intervention programs on campus are guided by empirical evidence, their view of the meaning and purpose of the high-risk drinking is at odds with the view held by the college students themselves. The outsiders’ view (such as that obtained through the health care or educator lens) asserts that the students’ performances in key roles and relationships lack the variety and challenge necessary for healthy and sustained development of skills, abilities, and healthy self-concept.

Similar to depictions of other types of serious leisure, the participants in this study often lack social acceptance for the fervency with which they engaged in the chosen pursuit. Many studies noted the development of marginality or deviance in the chosen hobby. The participants themselves, however, ignored the social censure because of their strong identification with others who reflect or share their values. Even if the social or familial members expressed displeasure with the person’s time allocation or money expenditures on the activity, the serious leisure enthusiast often persevered because of the strong connection to the leisure pursuit as a source of personal identity.

This study also supports findings from previous research surrounding the correlations between an early-age of onset of drinking and the increased likelihood for high-risk drinking at later ages (Hawkins et al., 1997; King & Chassin, 2007). For example, the two participants who initiated drinking at the earliest ages (in middle or high school) had escalated to the highest levels of drinking and had the highest AUDIT scores at the time of the study. Conversely, the participants who delayed drinking onset until their freshman year in college had the lowest AUDIT scores at the time of data collection.

The participants cited numerous benefits of using alcohol with other hobbyists. One benefit was the ease with which social interactions were facilitated by drinking. The use of alcohol as a social lubricant has been documented (Nezek, Pilkington, & Bilbro, 1994; Quintero, Young, Mier, & Jenks, 2005). A second benefit was the sense of cohesiveness found with the other hobbyists as a group. Previous research has also highlighted the compelling need college students have to be accepted into and involved with a social group (Misch, 2007).

Implications for Occupational Therapy

The findings from this study may serve to illustrate how occupational therapists, health care providers, mental health counselors, and university administrators should create and implement prevention and intervention programs on university campuses. The participants justified their engagement in the high-risk drinking hobby because it provided emotional, cognitive, physical, and social pleasure within an overt group atmosphere. Any intervention program needs to be designed with the aim to help college students achieve those experiences through less harmful, but equally pleasurable, leisure
occupations. Most importantly, any intervention program should incorporate the opportunity for students to engage in group experiences in order to meet their need to find a sense of belongingness with their peers. Yaeger (2000) notes that it is a common phenomenon for functional substance abusers to tell occupational therapists that they were maintaining their ability to perform their occupational roles adequately, although eventually their productivity levels would probably diminish. Health care workers and administrators can strive to educate clients and challenge their denial of the potential for harm. In general, occupational therapy intervention groups often include a psychoeducational component to consider the underlying maladaptive habits surrounding substance abuse and address time organization and management as a central theme (Buijsse et al., 1999; Kwitny, 1998; Stoffel, 1994).

Future Research

Future research might focus upon specific subgroups of university students to understand further their experiences and motivation to be high-risk drinkers. In this study, the student athletes expressed a particularly strong allegiance to their teammates and spoke of tensions within the sub-culture of an athletic department. Further research might focus specifically upon several collegiate sub-groups who are considered to be at-risk for developing high-risk drinking patterns: athletes, freshmen, and members of sororities or fraternities. Another area of study would be to consider the experiences of students living within a residential university context. Additionally, research focused upon the experiences of African American students' or other minority groups' drinking behaviors may reveal different findings from what this study has provided. Health care researchers might also consider the flipside of the high-risk drinking issue and conduct research designed to learn what we can from the nearly 40% of students (Wechsler et al., 2002), who are sober or exhibit controlled-drinking behaviors.

Finally, an investigation of the outcomes of an occupational therapy based intervention program developed and implemented for a university student population is warranted. Of particular interest would be elements designed to help college students explore and possibly initiate alternative ways to find the relaxation/stimulation, fun, and belongingness which they seek through high-risk drinking.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the participant pool in this study lacked diversity. The fact that no African American students volunteered for the study may be indicative of the lower incidence of high-risk drinking within this population (ACHA, 2007, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2002). Alternatively, it may be indicative of the hesitancy or reluctance of African American students to participate in the study.
students to talk about the subject matter. Second, the study was limited to students who were older than 21-years of age in order to comply with the IRB guidelines. The differences between the expectations and lived-experiences of younger students who were new to the college experience might reveal a more acute recall of the transition to high-risk drinking. Additionally, the study was limited to the experiences of high-risk drinkers who were currently in college. Young adults who had left college might reveal another dimension to issues surrounding the hobby. Finally, the students who self-selected to be in the study may have characteristics which are not typical of most students at a Midwestern urban university.

SUMMARY

By understanding the basis of the participants’ viewpoint that high-risk drinking is a harmless occupation, we can potentially understand the depth of their denial that their actions put them at risk for physical, psychological, or occupational dysfunction. This study has provided an alternative view into the world of the collegiate high-risk drinker and revealed the strength of the participants’ denial of the importance of the risks and negative consequences which they encountered while engaged in the high-risk drinking hobby. Because their hobby provided opportunities for a high degree of pleasure and belongingness, the participants were willing to readily dismiss any negative impact in such areas as financial, physical, or emotional harm. There is a clear emergent role for occupational therapists to assist college students to discover alternative and healthy ways to find positive leisure pursuits, occupational balance, and belongingness while transitioning to college.

REFERENCES


