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CHAPTER 32

"HEY, DON'T BLAME ME . . . BLAME THE BOOZE"

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It has long been known in sociology that when people commit a deviant act they tend to excuse it in order to get away with it. In excusing a deviant act, they in effect are saying that "it was wrong, but it wasn't my fault" (Scott and Lyman, 1981). If pressed why the deviant act was not their fault, they would insist that it was not actually they who did it but something beyond their control that caused them to do it. In our culture, that something often turns out to be alcohol. Thus, if people have committed a deviant act when they were drunk, they may insist that it was not their fault but the fault of the alcohol. They are in effect saying, "Hey, don't blame me, blame the booze." Getting drunk from liquor is often used as an excuse for many forms of deviant behavior, which may include insulting others, disorderly conduct, assault, fighting, wife beating, child abuse, and so on. The study here, however, focuses on traditionally or stereotypically gender-inappropriate behaviors, which violate the social norms that require men to behave like men and women to behave like women. Examples of gender-inappropriate behaviors include men acting feminine by paying excessive attention to their appearance, wearing jewelry, or sitting ladylike, and women acting masculine by being assertive, aggressive, tough, or emotionless. Gender-inappropriate behavior can also include the practice of homosexuality,

because it is regarded as deviant in our society. We will see how alcohol is used to excuse such deviant behaviors.

METHOD

Seventy-eight one-on-one in-depth interviews lasting an average 1.5 hours were conducted with an all-volunteer sample. Informed consent was given for participation and all respondents were assured confidentiality. Participants were from a medium-sized, public university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. College class ranking ranged from freshmen to senior status. Participants lived both on and off campus. Seventy-one percent ($N = 55$) of the sample were whites and 26% ($N = 20$) were African Americans. The remaining three percent were Hispanics and Asians. Fifty-three percent ($N = 41$) were male while 47% were female ($N = 37$). Seventy-two percent ($N = 56$) identified themselves as heterosexual; 22% ($N = 17$) as homosexual, and the remaining 6% ($N = 5$) as bisexual.

Attending the target university as an undergraduate was the only eligibility criterion for this study. The majority of participants responded to announcements in sociology and criminology courses and to 10 notices posted in campus areas frequented by students. Flyers and announce-

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ments called for participation in a "study on experiences with alcohol use among college students."

A semi-structured open-ended interview guide, consisting of 12 guiding questions, was developed and pilot tested by the author. The questions were asked about drinking quantity, frequency, attitudes toward drinking, reasons for drinking, expectations of alcohol use, and the consequences of drinking. The most important questions for this study were: (1) what does drinking and getting drunk mean to you? (2) what have been your experiences with alcohol? (3) what are your expectations of people who get drunk? and (4) what goes through your mind when you see someone drinking or getting drunk?

FINDINGS

Female and male participants discussed how they used alcohol as an excuse for their gender-inappropriate behaviors that our society traditionally regards as deviant in nature. They also describe how alcohol excuses were used by their friends and peers for behaviors considered "bad," "wrong," or "immoral."

Alcohol Excuses by Women

When asked how she felt under the influence of alcohol, Jenny, a white heterosexual, said:

[Alcohol] allows you not to be yourself. It is very common, we use it to have an excuse for things that we do . . . like hooking up with a guy or saying something very mean to your friends or doing something very wrong . . . I mean girls are so much more outgoing when drinking. I do things that I wouldn't do sober, like going up to boys to say, "Hi, my name is . . ."

This account demonstrates the license alcohol gives young women to take risks, be more bold, assertive and, in some cases, more aggressive in their social interaction and pursuit of romantic partners. Alcohol use appeared to offer some protection against shame and stigma for women engaging in these gender-inappropriate behaviors.

To these women, alcohol makes their gender-inappropriate behaviors acceptable, although such behaviors are traditionally regarded as deviant. Consider the next account from Julia, a white heterosexual woman, as an example of how young women alter the traditional mode of being feminine in order to suit their needs as unique individuals instead of as "girls" or "women":

It is about being more open when people drink, like being able to talk to people you wouldn't talk to. I think that women are much more self-conscious than guys are and so drinking gets rid of that. You don't care what you look like . . . because you are drunk.

Note how Julia expressed in the preceding quote the defiant idea that the strict norm requiring women to be concerned with their appearance can be momentarily suspended when drinking. Another white heterosexual female student felt the same way, saying ". . . you don't go into the bathroom and like put your make up on when you're drunk. You don't even think about it." Such statements imply that our culture encourages women to be preoccupied with their appearance to ensure that they look beautiful in a feminine way. But in these women's views, drinking makes them feel that they no longer need to worry about the stereotyped gender-appropriate behavior for women.

Alcohol use further allowed women to ignore the judgment of others. Tina, an African American heterosexual, felt that she was able to be freer in what she said when drinking. As she stated, "the liquor makes you a little more free to say whatever you want." Jen and Susan, both white heterosexuals, illustrated this point as well:

Jen: "I think it [alcohol] opens you up a little more . . . you're not as worried about what people are thinking."

Susan: "It's just a sense of false confidence that you get—like you're more open to talk to just anyone . . . I don't care . . . what I'm saying. When I am sober . . . I'm more cautious. There is this sense that a girl should be either

passive or quiet and when they are drunk . . . they can be loud . . . more outgoing and not care what people think."

Alcohol enabled other female participants to be freer in their sexuality. Liz, a white lesbian, for example, felt that under the influence of alcohol women became less sexually constrained. To Liz, sex became more "enjoyable" with her partner after imbibing alcohol. In her words, sexual "inhibitions" vanished. As she said,

We have the best sex when we're drunk. We are much freer when we are drunk. It is easier to do a lot of things when you're drunk . . . than like say sober sex. We can do or say things that might sound pushy or weird if you weren't, um, drunk. When we are sober we think, "oh that was a dumb thing to say" but I can say "oh, I was drunk!" I'm not big on public displays of affection and neither is my girlfriend but after drinking, that changes. If we are in public and drunk, we do stuff that we think would be inappropriate otherwise.

Above, Liz makes the distinction between "sober sex" and the bodily empowerment of drunken sex, which includes conspicuous displays of assertiveness. For women, the display of bodily empowerment may require drinking in public, as contrasted with men, who do not have to consume alcohol in order to feel physically powerful. Liz also stated that the fear of sounding "pushy" as a woman disappeared with the aid of alcohol consumption. Another white lesbian, Cindy, discussed how alcohol use can lead to sexual promiscuity. She explained how she used alcohol as an excuse to "hook up" with other women. Without the excuse, she said that she would be labeled by others as a "slut" or "whore," while men engaged in similar sexual promiscuity would be considered more positively as "studs" or "players."

The preceding account by Cindy, a lesbian, reveals how the double-standard of sexuality that exists for heterosexual women also applies to women in the lesbian community. But the lesbians ignored the double-standard allowing only men, not women, to be promiscuous by being

promiscuous themselves. They could do this while keeping their feminine identity intact, thanks to the use of alcohol. Liz, a lesbian, also pointed out that one of her friends became "very sexual" with men after using alcohol. As Liz said,

My friend . . . would get all drunk and when everybody was drunk she would say, "Okay, who wants to fuck me?" And she would come home with like a random guy. If she wants to have sex with guys, it's not like, "you are gay, and you shouldn't be having sex with guys." Drinking helped her do that in my opinion.

Embedded in this erotic encounter with men is an element of sexual aggression in Liz's lesbian friend, which represented a form of masculine behavior, hence a traditionally gender-inappropriate experience. Like Liz, many men found how "forward" women could be in initiating sexual contact with men when drinking or drunk. As Anthony, a white heterosexual man observed, "Yeah, they will be more flirtatious after drinking. They will be willing to initiate the first touch." Adrian, another heterosexual male who was black, expressed dismay at the forward behavior of an intoxicated young woman:

I went to a party and this girl grabbed my privates, right? And she was like, "Yo dude, what is up?" I was like, "look man, you need to go ahead and chill out." And I thought about it and I was like, "No, I can't do it [reciprocate the sexual advancement]."

The quote above demonstrates how a female displayed a deviant, gender-inappropriate behavior as a result of consuming alcohol. The use of alcohol could thus be an excuse for the deviant display if it did not sit well with peers and others. That's why many women who feared that their deviant act would be seen by others as such used alcohol as an excuse to explain away potential embarrassment.

Most women—and also men—reported that it was possible for women to be assertive because alcohol was involved. The alcohol excuse protected these women from being bombarded with nasty labels (such as "slut," "bitch,"

“whore,” “tramp,” and “hoochie”) that are imposed on women who behave in a gender-inappropriate behavior by exerting desire, power, control, or aggression while being sober. Even if their gender-inappropriate behavior caused others to give them those negative labels, the use of alcohol enabled them to feel a boost in their self-esteem.

Taken together, these accounts support the idea that the use of alcohol as an excuse for gender-inappropriate behavior minimizes or absolves responsibility for that deviant behavior. The alcohol excuse further enables women to safeguard their gender identity as normal heterosexuals or homosexuals, without suffering any harmful impact from the gender-inappropriate behavior brought on by alcohol.

Alcohol Excuses by Men

Sammy, a white heterosexual, shared his thoughts about writing poetry as a deviant activity that was inappropriate for his gender as a man to engage in. To him, writing poetry was an activity “normally” reserved for women; it was “girl” behavior. As he said,

I got really drunk and I said [to my friends]: “Give me a pad and paper.” I started writing poetry! I went on and on for like three hours writing poetry. It was ridiculous. It was all about God and all this stuff. The next morning . . . I felt like an idiot [laughter].

Sammy explained that he would not “normally” engage in such behavior unless he was drunk. He considered poetry writing a “girl” thing primarily because it entailed an expression of emotion. Like Sammy, many other male participants in this study had difficulty expressing emotion unless they consumed alcohol. Through the use of alcohol, then, these men excused themselves for expressing emotion, so that they could maintain their male gender identity. Another white heterosexual, Steve, discussed how getting drunk helped him express his emotion by crying:

During this year, some girl rejected me and I got upset. She was like “Oh, I don’t want a relationship with you.” I really liked the girl . . . I was pretty drunk and I got upset and I just left and I went back to the dorms and cried . . . I would have been alright if I wasn’t drunk.

Thanks to alcohol, Steve was able to cry “like a woman” but maintain his masculine identity because his feminine act of crying did not come from him but from the liquor. Another white heterosexual male, Alex, also suggested how he and his friends benefited the same way from the use of alcohol:

When it is just me and my friends hanging out, and we get really liquored up, we’ve gotten into really deep conversation. We have cried on each other’s shoulders . . . we don’t have to act tough.

Some male heterosexuals in this study discussed how the use of alcohol enabled them to engage in homosexual acts, which are socially stereotyped as unmasculine or effeminate in nature. Again, the liquor provided them with an excuse for committing the gender-inappropriate act. Consider, for example, how Sam, an African American heterosexual, and Adam, a white heterosexual, explained their homosexual activities:

Sam: “When people do things when they are drunk, they meant to do it. So they can have the opportunity to do things that they otherwise couldn’t do cause it is morally or ethically incorrect. They have an excuse. And most of the time people accept it.”

Adam: “There are “straight” people that use alcohol as an excuse [or] as an outlet because they think that it is wrong at some level [to be gay]. I think they do [engage in homosexual activity] and they can say ‘oh I was drunk so it’s okay’ . . . They can say ‘I was really drunk and I didn’t know what I was doing.’”

Just as heterosexuals engage in gender-inappropriate behavior by having sex with fellow heterosexuals, they may also have sex with ho-

mosexuals. Whether their sex partners are heterosexual or homosexual, the homosexual act is socially considered inappropriate. Similarly, it is also inappropriate for gays to have heterosexuals as sex partners, because gays are socially expected to have sex only with fellow homosexuals. To make it easier to engage in this gender-inappropriate activity, however, gays and straights may resort to the use of alcohol. In the following quote, James, a white gay man, recounted his experience with heterosexual sex partners while everybody was drunk:

When I was like eighteen and just finally coming to terms with being gay, I had friends that let me hang with them. I had dealt with guys in high school calling me fag. So I had these friends who liked me for me so it was nice finally to have people accept me. Well these friends had a few gay friends that didn't like me much because I was gay. One night we had this knock-out party, we all got . . . drunk. Well these guys suddenly wanted me to perform oral sex with them and I refused of course. Then they wanted to do it to me so I let them. Anyway, they did it after calling me faggot. These guys went down on me and performed oral sex on me . . . I was not shocked at all. I believe they were covering up their true feelings with alcohol use and the like. I believe men do it to cover it up.

Gender-inappropriate behavior may also involve a man having sex with an unattractive woman unless he is drunk. Such an experience is described in the following quote from Victor, a white heterosexual:

Victor: "I had sex with someone, like a rather big girl. I was drunk and I didn't have like unprotected sex but the bottom line is I had sex with her. I just like totally gave in."

Interviewer: "Is that something you regretted?"

Victor: "Oh my God, yeah . . . really bad. But I was drunk, so it was an accident."

Victor used the alcohol excuse to distance himself from sexual behavior with women deemed inappropriate. Masculine men are presumed to practice sexual acts with appropriate partners that exclude other men or "undesirable" women. Alcohol can thus be used as an excuse for committing the inappropriate act.

Gay men also tend to use alcohol to counteract the stigma of being homosexual, socially considered undesirable in our homophobic society. This may explain why young gay men who are first experiencing the difficult process of "coming out" often resort to drinking as a way of excusing their "deviancy" so as to accept it as a normal part of their lives. As Hector, a white gay man, said,

Hector: ". . . having one or two drinks helped me to loosen up. . . it helps [me be more] comfortable in a situation and open up a little bit more . . ."

Interviewer: "Have you been progressing with your coming out; are you getting more comfortable?"

Hector: "Oh yeah, definitely. I can actually go to a club sober now."

Like the women in this study, the men here use alcohol as an excuse for their gender-inappropriate behavior. Being drunk, in effect, takes away the responsibility for that deviant behavior. The alcohol excuse also enables those men to protect their gender identity as normal heterosexuals or homosexuals, which they are when sober and not engaging in deviant, gender-inappropriate behavior.

REFERENCE

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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Discuss at least three situations where *men* can use alcohol to excuse their gender-inappropriate behavior.
2. Discuss at least three situations where *women* can use alcohol to excuse their gender-inappropriate behavior.
3. Could you avoid behaving badly if you are drunk? If so, how? If not, why not?