



ASA NEWS

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Binge Drinking College Students Are Happier Than Their Non-Binge Drinking Peers

DENVER — Why do some colleges have persistently high levels of binge drinking? It may be because, at these schools, binge drinking is associated with high status and binge drinkers are happier with their college social experience than their non-binge drinking peers, suggests new research to be presented at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

“Binge drinking is a symbolic proxy for high status in college,” said Carolyn L. Hsu, co-author of the study and an associate professor of sociology at Colgate University. “It’s what the most powerful, wealthy, and happy students on campus do. This may explain why it’s such a desirable activity. When lower status students binge drink, they may be trying to tap into the benefits and the social satisfaction that those kids from high status groups enjoy. And, our findings seem to indicate that, to some extent, they succeed.”

According to the study, students from higher status groups (i.e., wealthy, male, white, heterosexual, and Greek affiliated undergraduates) were consistently happier with their college social experience than their peers from lower status groups (i.e., less wealthy; female; non-white; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ); and non-Greek affiliated undergraduates).

In addition, students from higher status groups were more likely than their peers from lower status groups to binge drink. “Students, who are considered more socially powerful, drink more,” said Hsu, who co-authored the study with Landon Reid, a former faculty member at Colgate who is now attending law school at NYU. “Binge drinking then becomes associated with high status and the ‘cool’ students on campus.”

However, the study found that when students from lower status groups engaged in binge drinking, their social satisfaction was higher than that of their non-binge drinking peers from lower status groups and more similar to the levels of their higher status classmates, including binge drinkers and non-binge drinkers. Hsu said binge drinking tended to attenuate the negative effects of being from a low status group on students’ college social experience.

Conversely, white, wealthy, Greek affiliated, heterosexual, and male students who did not binge drink, were less happy with their social lives than students from those groups that did binge drink.

“Among all groups, we found that binge drinking and social satisfaction were strongly connected,” Hsu said.

The study relied on a survey of nearly 1,600 undergraduates attending a selective Northeastern residential liberal arts college in 2009.

“Drinking culture is campus specific,” Hsu said. “But, our results suggest that binge drinking and social satisfaction may also be very much associated at similar predominately white colleges with high binge drinking rates, a large Greek presence, and a residential campus.”

Binge drinking is defined as consuming at least four drinks for women and five drinks for men in a single drinking session. Binge drinkers have this kind of drinking session at least once every 14 days on average. In this study, the average binge drinker drank 13.7 drinks per week, while the average non-binge drinker consumed 4.2 drinks per week. The authors assessed social satisfaction using survey questions that asked students to evaluate their overall social experience on campus.

Additionally, the authors categorized high status groups and low status groups based on previous literature regarding low graduation rates, peer discrimination, and hostile campus environments.

For example, according to the authors, LGBTQ students commonly found their campuses to be unwelcoming; women, who often enjoy more collegiate academic success than men, were more likely than their male peers to experience prejudice and sexual harassment outside of the classroom; and minority students, particularly at predominately white schools, tended to have lower graduation rates and faced increased incidents of discrimination on campus.

The authors found that while binge drinking increased social satisfaction for students from a range of lower status groups, the positive effects of binge drinking on social satisfaction were particularly strong for low income, non-Greek affiliated, and female students. LGBTQ and minority binge drinking students enjoyed increased social satisfaction in college, but were not as socially satisfied as their binge drinking peers from higher and other lower status groups.

“Minority students and members of the LGBTQ community, more than other low status students, often face discrimination and struggle with their sense of belonging on predominately white, heterosexual campuses,” Hsu said. “This may be lessening the potential ameliorating impact of binge drinking on low status.”

Nevertheless, the authors found that across race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and Greek or non-Greek affiliation, the connection between binge drinking and satisfaction with the college social experience, remained consistent. “Students in all groups consistently liked college more when they participated in the campuses’ binge drinking culture,” Hsu said.

Students were motivated to binge drink as a way of fitting in, according to Hsu. In the open comments part of the survey, many students wrote that they did not want to binge drink, but felt that it was the only socially acceptable thing to do for fun.

Interestingly, the researchers did not find evidence that unhappy students were binge drinking to self medicate. Instead, the students in the sample with the most stress, anxiety, and experiences with discrimination or sexual abuse, were the least likely to drink. “It’s the kids who say everything is great who drink the most,” Hsu said.

The authors found that students saw binge drinking as a logical means to adapt, survive, and seek out the most favorable life while in college. “Low status students in particular seem to be using binge drinking as a vehicle for social mobility and as a way to contend with an otherwise hostile social environment,” Hsu said.

According to the authors, despite binge drinking’s potential positive social effects, binge drinking students were not exempt from the negative interpersonal and health outcomes associated with heavy alcohol consumption.

“It’s not that binge drinking is the solution to complex social problems,” Hsu said. “Rather, it is our hope that when universities and public health professionals design alcohol related programs for students, they take into account the full range and important social motivations underlying student binge drinking.”

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About the American Sociological Association

The American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society.

The paper, “Social Status, Binge Drinking, and Social Satisfaction among College Students,” will be presented on Monday, Aug. 20, at 2:30 p.m. MDT in Denver, Colorado, at the American Sociological Association’s 107th Annual Meeting.

To obtain a copy of the paper; for more information on other ASA presentations; or for assistance reaching the study’s author(s), members of the media can contact Daniel Fowler, ASA’s Media Relations and Public Affairs Officer, at (202) 527-7885 or pubinfo@asanet.org. During the Annual Meeting (Aug. 17-20), ASA’s Public Information Office staff can be reached in the press room, located in Mezzanine A of the Colorado Convention Center, at (303) 228-8350 or (914) 450-4557 (cell).

This press release was written by Arielle Baran, ASA Office of Public Affairs and Public Information.

Papers presented at the ASA Annual Meeting are typically working papers that have not yet been published in peer reviewed journals.