

# College Alcohol Use and the Embodiment of Hegemonic Masculinity among European American Men

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Published online: 19 May 2007  
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**Abstract** This article concerns alcohol use as it pertains to the construction of White masculinity through an analysis of students' accounts. Seventy-eight face-to-face interviews were conducted with volunteer female and male, African American, European American, heterosexual and homosexual students at a mid-sized university. Results suggest that the meaning of public drinking is to express a form of masculinity. In students' gendered descriptions of their own and peers' drinking behavior, alcohol use among White men was found to symbolize the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Masculinities were constructed via drinking stories, the body's ability to tolerate alcohol, and the relevance of drinking too little or not at all, which symbolized weakness, homosexuality, or femininity. Implications for social policy and future research are discussed.

**Keywords** Hegemonic masculinity · Embodiment · Gender · Alcohol · College · Qualitative research · Deviance

The reduction of alcohol-related problems among college students remains a formidable task. "Alcohol-related problems among college students" may be a euphemism for "European American (EA) college students' drinking," given that the vast majority of college students who experience alcohol-related problems are those students who experience alcohol-related problems disproportionately EA men (Peralta and Kuo 2003). An important aspect of this problem is the role of the college campus (Peralta 2001). Although college campuses are often cited in the literature as settings for the construction of "gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), the role of college students in the construction of gender is less clear.

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Journal of Sex Research  
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Research has documented the epidemiology of alcohol use by gender. Sixteen general population surveys from ten countries (Wilsnack et al. 2000) show men more likely than women to drink. Male drinkers consumed alcohol more frequently and in larger amounts, and were more likely than female drinkers to have alcohol-related problems. Differences in the magnitude of gender differences across countries have been found to be strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors (Gilbert and Collins 1997; Streifel 1997). This suggests that the relatively small biological differences in how alcohol affects women and men are magnified by cultural norms for how women and men should or should not use alcohol. Drinking behavior may be a useful way to symbolize more general differences in gender practices and to make gender role differences more conspicuous. Thus, many societies with major differences in men's and women's practices have also largely forbidden women, but not men, to drink (McDonald 1994).

National studies by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Monitoring the Future survey, each indicate that drinking quantity and frequency rates peak between the ages of 18 and 25 years. Whereas illicit drug use is higher among non-college students, alcohol use/abuse is higher among college students than among their non-college peers, which suggests normative age-related social patterns (Dowdall et al. 2002; O'Malley et al. 2002).

sexuality of men (Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 1993)

masculinity among college students, a group for whom alcohol use is a serious problem (Locke and Mahalik 2005; Wilson et al. 2004; Young et al. 2005).

The relevance of gender dynamics to the problems of

were the only criteria for inclusion. Twenty-four percent of



of something, or maybe someone would bring some-

additional four men and seven women reported how men, when drinking, thought they were “invincible.” Over one-half of the sample discussed or referred to “liquid courage.” “Invincibility” was a term used frequently by both men and women to describe feelings that “men” express when binge drinking. Again, the male body is implicated in the embodiment of gender as illustrated in the accounts that follow. Consider Henry’s (EA, heterosexual) account:

I’ve done all kinds of stupid things [when drinking]. One of my friends was driving my jeep, and I tried to jump out of it and into my friend’s pick up doing like 80 on the freeway. We used to do flips off my roof and into the pool back home. We used to do all kinds of stupid stuff.

Commitment to risk-taking practices as a means of establishing a masculine reputation in a peer group context was evident in students’ accounts. These behaviors appeared to be expected, as evidenced by respondents’ assumptions about the “natural” links between masculinity, alcohol use, and risk-taking. These assumptions are a product of negotiations between EA men, women, and other subordinated groups. The power of expectations should thus not be underestimated. There is no emphasized effort to curtail or prevent alcohol-related behaviors because so many expect it to occur as part of a “natural” byproduct of men’s drinking (see Peralta and Cruz 2006). The statements below exemplify this. Jerry, an EA, heterosexual fraternity brother stated:

When you are wasted, that’s when you have a head





"Two-beer Queers" versus "Real Drinkers": Exaltation

behavior is normative. Additional evidence that drinking heavily is indicative of youthful EA heterosexual masculinity was provided by James, a heterosexual EA man.

gender role socialization. Within this context, the pressures to engage in masculinity work can be significant, and the consequences are potentially deleterious. As such, it is important to note that hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily translate into a satisfying experience of life.

## **Discussion**

The present article expands upon the existing gender and alcohol research by integrating the study of drinking with the broader issue of gender construction, specifically, the embodiment of masculinity. In the present study, I examined alcohol's role as a resource in the expression of hegemonic masculinity among men in comparison with subjugated masculinities and femininities. I discuss the role of alcohol, as both a substance and a symbol. This research follows the symbolic interactionist tradition where alcohol is viewed as a symbol through which meaning (hegemonic masculinity) is created in the privileged local context of the college campus.

Hegemonic masculinities do not exist in the statistical sense, yet their qualities are considered normative. Masculinity is defined as a configuration of practice organized in relation to the structure of gender relations. Masculinity needs to be reproduced actively in social settings. For youth, sport is among the most common means of masculinity reproduction. Among youth in college, the prevalence and centrality of drinking alcohol suggests that it is an area in which

did not assert that women's heavy alcohol use was a way to express power. Their drinking stories did not symbolize strength or power as women. Women largely viewed heavy drinking among women as potentially problematic, shameful, and stigmatizing behavior unbecoming of women.<sup>6</sup> Some women had fond memories of the "party atmosphere" associated with drinking, but did not present alcohol use as symbols of femininity. Drinking was not the focus of their social events. For women, drinking was secondary to the primary goal, which was to socialize and/or meet potentiall

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The question of race and drinking is of relevance here. Studies suggest that young racial and ethnic minorities tend to drink less than their EA counterparts (Peralta 2005; Jones-Webb et al. 1998; Wechsler and Kuo 2003). Social structural conditions shape the understanding of what

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