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“A Cool Little Buzz”: Alcohol intoxication in an Asian American nightlife scene

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Abstract

Intoxication—a state of altered consciousness brought about by the ingestion of intoxicants.

Nighttime economy—The term refers to those nighttime activities primarily associated with bars and clubs that take place within commercialized spaces in inner urban areas.

Raves—Although the precise origin of the word rave is unclear, with some writers associating it with bohemian parties in London in 1950s and others suggesting that raves began in the 1960s in San Francisco, by the late 1980s raves referred primarily to a dance parties, often unlicensed, where electronic music including acid house and techno music, was the music of choice.

Asian American—The pan-ethnic category “Asian American” comprises a large, diverse group of ethnic groups in the United States, representing dozens of cultures, national backgrounds, and languages, including those of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, and Vietnamese descent.

Emerging adulthood—This term was coined to capture a life-course phase experienced by young adults in many contemporary western societies who are post-adolescence, but who have not yet achieved many of the traditional (twentieth century) life course markers that were associated with adulthood, such as completion of education, beginning of career, marriage, and parenthood (Arnett 2000)

Keywords

intoxication; alcohol; youth; asian-american; club cultures

INTRODUCTION

Intoxication has long been considered a major public health problem, especially among young people. It is associated with a wide range of health problems and adverse consequences (Wechsler et al., 1994), is a major risk factor for mortality and morbidity (Rehm, 2011; Perkins, 2001), and can lead to a whole host of social problems (Keane, 2009; Yardley, 2012; Bancroft, 2009; Engineer et al., 2003). Within the US, much of the research examining drunken behavior and heavy episodic drinking among young adults has been conducted with college students, a population with a high prevalence of intoxication and alcohol misuse (Ham & Hope, 2003; Clapp et al., 2000; Dowdall et al., 1998; Wechsler et al. 2008). A focus on college students’ drinking has also meant that much of the research on

alcohol consumption has examined drinking within the context of the University campus. While the college setting is an important sociocultural context for some young adult drinking, it is nevertheless important to examine other settings of young adult drinking and intoxication, including those within more public arenas such as bars and clubs. With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to examine alcohol intoxication among young adults, not within a college context, but instead within bars and clubs in an urban setting. The data for this paper is taken from a series of in-depth interviews with young people who frequent bars, clubs and raves in San Francisco.

These interviews were part of a larger project, started in 2000, on drug and alcohol consumption among young adults within the nighttime economy of San Francisco (Hunt & Evans 2003; Hunt & Evans 2008; Hunt, Moloney, and Evans, 2009, 2010; Moloney, Hunt, Bailey & Erez 2009). Over the course of two research projects in the early 2000s, we noticed over time a shift in the narratives of the interviews we were conducting, away from a focus on drug use toward an increased emphasis on *alcohol* intoxication. This coincided with a shift in the region away from more grassroots “raves,” towards involvement in the commercial dance club scene (Moloney et al. 2009; Hunt et al. 2010). This changing nature of substance use and the preferred form of intoxication led us to explore further the role, attitudes and perceptions associated with alcohol intoxication. The results of these interviews are detailed below.

Studies of Intoxication

Drinking alcohol is often deeply tied up with being sociable. The intricate relationship between drinking and sociability has been documented in such diverse drinking arenas as English pubs (Hunt & Satterlee, 1986a; 1986b), Finnish bars (Sulkunen et al., 1997), African Beer Gardens (Wolcott, 1974), Mexican cantinas (Palafox, 2001), or American taverns (Oldenburg, 1997). Drinking in these settings is so synonymous with drinking communally that solitary drinking is generally viewed as an aberration (Partanen, 1991: 218). However while drinking leads to increased sociability, a possible consequence of drinking for the individual is an altered state of consciousness or *intoxication*. Although the state of intoxication is an individual or psychological component of drinking, anthropologists have long argued that it is nevertheless “inextricably conjoined with the social and collective part of drinking practices” (Partanen, 1991: 223).

Although somewhat neglected today, MacAndrew and Edgerton in their famous book *Drunken Compartment*, published in 1969, emphasized the importance of the culturally defined nature of intoxication. The significance of their seminal work was to establish the view that the interpretations that individuals make of intoxication is only partially shaped by the chemical or pharmacological effects of the substance (Paton-Simpson, 1996). The meanings given to the experience of intoxication, including how one interprets these feelings, “are provided by the culture in which one is participant” (Marshall, 1983: 200). As in the case of drinking, intoxication is also viewed as being intimately tied up with commensality, with trust and reciprocity (Kneale, 2004). While early anthropological works in this area were embedded in a functionalist paradigm and sought primarily to understand the role of intoxication and the norms that influenced the resulting behavior, later

researchers argued that a primary focus should be to examine the *meaning* of intoxication (Sulkunen, 2002). What is it about intoxication that makes the desire for an altered consciousness meaningful? In examining this question, researchers have argued that intoxication and intoxicated behavior may mean different things to different people in different circumstances at different points of time (Paton-Simpson, 1996).

Researchers in the UK, who have examined the increase in binge drinking and intoxicated behaviour among young people have argued that intoxication is no longer viewed by many young adults as a danger to be avoided but rather a goal to be achieved (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Griffin, et al., 2009; Guise and Gill, 2007; Martinic and Measham, 2008; Measham, 2004a; Szmigin et al., 2008). They argue that today young people seek intoxication not only for the “inherent excitement of the alcoholic rush” (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007, p. 447); their desire for “determined drunkenness” (Measham, 2008) is a way of experiencing self-actualization and self-expression thereby seizing some sense of control over their lives. They are “exercising individual rights to pleasure, hedonism or escapism” (Riley et al., 2010, p. 37). Binge drinking and drunkenness have also become part of a youth lifestyle (Østergaard, 2007) exhibited not solely in the UK but also evident in other European countries (Järvinen & Room, 2007), where researchers have noted a “shift towards a style of consumption characterized by heavy episodic drinking” (Mayock, 2004, p. 117).

While a focus on heavy episodic drinking is quite common in the alcohol research conducted in the United States (Naimi et al., 2003; Dawson et al., 2004; Carey et al., 2001; Wechsler et al., 2000), as well as research on alcohol expectancies, motivations, and peer norms (Neighbors et al., 2007; Borsari et al., 2003; Baer et al., 2002; Schulte et al., 2009; Rauch et al., 2000), the issue of intoxication itself, and particularly its meaning for those who experience it, is less developed in the American literature than recent research in the UK (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Griffin, et al., 2009; Martinic and Measham, 2008; Measham, 2004b; Szmigin et al., 2008). There are a few significant works that analyze young adult nightlife formations in the US (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Grazian, 2008; Perrone, 2009), however, alcohol intoxication was not a primary focus or significant component of these works. Although some important socio-cultural analysis of young adult alcohol use has been conducted (e.g., Giles, 1999; Palacios, 2005; Peralta, 2005 & 2008; Peralta & Steele, 2009), the majority of the research on youthful drinking in the US has been done from an epidemiological perspective, documenting the “problem” of binge drinking and risk factors for it, but not performing a cultural analysis of the meaning of intoxication or the socio-historical context of changing interpretations of it, and generally not engaging with the important UK and other European scholarship on intoxication of the past decade. With these issues in mind, we set out to examine the role and meaning of intoxication for a group of young adults who frequent the nightlife of San Francisco.

Asian American Young Adults and Intoxication

Although we began our research in 2000, initially focusing on all young people who attended raves and clubs (Hunt et al. 2010), we began to realize that Asian American young adults were extensively involved in the scene (Hunt et al. 2005; Moloney et al. 2008). Their involvement in both the scene and in drug and alcohol consumption contrasted sharply with

the absence of available research on substance use among Asian Americans. Consequently, in 2004 we commenced a second project with new respondents, which concentrated specifically on Asian American young adults, their involvement in the dance scene, and their use of illicit drugs and alcohol.

Asian Americans represent one of the fastest growing and most diverse ethnic groups in the US. However, the available research data on Asian American alcohol and drug use are relatively limited in comparison with the research on other major ethnic groups. Most of the national epidemiological data identifies young Asian Americans as having significantly lower rates of alcohol and drug consumption in comparison with other ethnic groups (Austin, 1999; Bachman et al., 1991; SAMHSA, 2002; 2008; Chen et al., 2004/5; Grant et al., 2004). Explanations offered for this difference range from cultural analyses of Asian American values as protective to biological arguments concerning genetic factors possessed by some East Asians associated with the “flushing response” to alcohol, which some suggest may be a protective factor against alcohol abuse (Hendershot et al., 2009; Wolff, 1972; Ewing et al., 1979; Chen et al., 1996), although other studies of this have produced mixed results (Fong & Tsuang, 2007; Luczak et al., 2003).

However, numerous researchers have highlighted the extent to which drug and alcohol use and drug and alcohol problems are significant and increasing in Asian American communities (Ja & Aoki, 1993; Zane & Huh-Kim, 1994; Jang, 1996; O'Hare & Tran, 1998; Nemoto et al., 1999; Yang & Solis, 2002; So and Wong, 2006; Wong et al., 2007; Fong & Tsuang, 2007; Iwamoto, 2012). Although overall rates of alcohol use among Asian American young are lower than white, African American or Latino young adults, recent research suggests that periodic heavy drinking or excessive drinking is prevalent. According to Makimoto (1998), Asian American youth who do drink have the highest levels of alcohol consumption per day when compared with other ethnic groups. Iwamoto and colleagues (2012) have identified binge drinking a major problem for some Asian American subgroups. And, according to treatment data, the number of Asian youth who are admitted for treatment has significantly increased in recent years (Hahm et al., 2004, p. 296). These data then suggest an interesting pattern – lower prevalence of alcohol consumption but high periodic consumption with potential alcohol-related problems. Therefore, in order to examine intoxication, Asian American young adults may prove to be a particularly enlightening group to explore in more detail. In so doing, we hope to uncover not only changing attitudes towards alcohol in the nightlife context, but also provide additional information on the drinking habits of an under-studied, but significant young adult group. More specifically, we will examine their attitudes and perceptions towards alcohol intoxication and its role and meaning within their lives.

In earlier publications using data from this project, we focused on intersections between ethnic identity and substance use and issues that may be particular to Asian American young adults (Fazio et al. 2010; Hunt et al. 2005; Hunt, Moloney & Evans 2011; Moloney et al. 2008; Moloney & Hunt 2012). In these previous works, we examined the ways in which illicit drug use was a resource drawn on by these young people in order to demarcate symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) between themselves and their social groups and others, including other groups of young Asian Americans (Moloney & Hunt 2012). One

pervasive cultural image of Asian Americans is as a “model minority.” In contrast to other racial/ethnic minorities, Asian Americans are depicted as hard-working, successful, less likely to be impoverished or involved in crime or substance use. This is an image that both problematically pits Asian Americans against other (less “model”) ethnic minority groups and that underestimates important differences within the Asian American category (Lee 1996; Choi & Lahey, 2006; Kawai, 2005; Kibria, 2002; Ono & Pham, 2009). The young people we interviewed grappled with representations of Asian Americans as a “model minority,” as something that they both reacted against and explained their own substance use in relation to. We noted three major sets of narratives connecting Asian American ethnic identity to substance use (Moloney et al. 2008; Hunt, Moloney & Evans 2011). The first discussed substance use as a natural outgrowth of the “in-between” position of being an Asian American. The second, which echoes model minority representations of Asian Americans, presented a disjuncture between being Asian American and illicit drug use or heavy alcohol use; respondents who tell this narrative cast their own substance use as unusual among Asian Americans. The third group saw nothing extraordinary about Asian American substance use and rather indicated normalized substance use for Asian American young adult social formations. Understandings of their selves and their drug use were shaped by their engagement with key lines of difference within Asian American youth cultures-- such as between American-born and foreign-born youth, acculturation levels and experience, as well as ethnonational, gender, and sexual differences, in constructing identities of themselves as young Asian Americans.

While these are important issues, we also believe that it is important not to reduce the experiences of Asian American young adults solely to issues of ethnicity and ethnic identity. To read their experiences only through the lens of ethnic identity is to ignore the complexity of their experiences, including their experiences with intoxication and substance use. Thus in the present paper we will be looking at experiences and interpretations of intoxication from the perspectives of the young people we interviewed-- interpretations that from them were often not organized around issues of ethnicity or difference but around the meaning and experience of alcohol use in their lives overall. Their discussions of intoxication contain more commonalities than differences with the experiences of other (non-Asian) young people in the dance club scenes who we have interviewed (Hunt et al. 2010). Thus we are not making an argument in this paper about the uniqueness of these experiences of intoxication to Asian American youth. Rather, we are examining this sample of Asian American young adults within the broader context of an understanding of intoxication-- including their voices and experiences within a line of research that has often been dominated by the voices of white youth.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected through 250 in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted with Asian Americans in the dance scene between 2005 and 2007. A brief, quantitative questionnaire was used to collect various socio-demographic characteristics and alcohol and drug-use data. For the rest of the interview, a semi-structured guide was used to collect primarily open-ended qualitative data on the respondents' background and family life, current everyday life, drug and alcohol use, and involvement in the dance scene. The interviewers included Asian

American and non-Asian American young adults, all of whom had experience in the dance club scenes and connections within Asian American communities. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of our Institute.

Results from the quantitative survey were entered into SPSS for analysis. The interviews were digitally recorded and the semi-structured portions of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts of the interviews were coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. The first 20 interviews were read in order to get a sense of the interviews as a whole and to develop categories for analysis. Initial codes included “Social Groups-Dance Scene,” “Asian Clubs or Events,” “Ecstasy,” “Ethnic Identity and Ethnicity.” Then followed repeated reading of the text, and more fine-grained codes were developed and linked to the larger domains (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Kelle, 2004; Schmidt, 2004). All 250 interview transcripts were then read and coded using the established categories. Once the codebook was standardized, staff members coded the same interviews together in order to establish a clear and common grasp of the coding system, with periodic checks on inter-coder reliability as the coding continued. After coding the data, the authors returned to the organized data, reading again through the results to analyze the themes discussed in this paper.

Sample

Using targeted sampling (Watters & Biernacki, 1989; Peterson et al., 2008), initial respondents were recruited using several methods, including advertisements, referrals from other respondents, and through contacts of the project staff. All respondents were given a \$50 honorarium for their participation. Though we cannot claim that this is a representative sample of Asian American young adults, or even of all Asian American young adults in the dance scenes, we were able to recruit a heterogeneous sample of Asian Americans involved in the nightlife scenes, with diversity in the types of clubs and venues frequented, the variety of dance and music styles preferred, level of involvement in the scenes, the degree of experience with club drugs and the extent of alcohol use. Each potential respondent was screened and included if he or she had used at least one of the six National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)-defined club drugs (ecstasy, LSD, methamphetamine, GHB, ketamine, Rohypnol) or mushrooms and was involved in the electronic dance music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area. Involvement in the scene was defined as attending dance events such as dance clubs or raves. Raves are large multi-room dance parties typically centered around a DJ who plays a variety of electronic dance music. In the San Francisco context, this includes both grassroots, underground, unlicensed events as well as more mainstream commercial licensed dance music events that were held on a large scale (Moloney et al. 2009; Hunt et al. 2010). We interviewed people with a wide range of experiences with club drugs, from those who were new users, to those who were frequent users, and to those who had used in the past but were not currently using.

Although overall our respondents ranged in age from 14 and 35,¹ with a mean age of 23, over half of the sample (55%) was between the ages of 18-24 (see Table 1) and 82% were

¹Parental consent was obtained for the interviews with minors under age 18.

between 18-29. These respondents fit into the new developmental life stage that some sociologists and demographers refer to as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000), or “early adulthood” (Settersten, Furstenbuerg and Rumbaut 2005), which falls between adolescence and traditional adulthood. This is meant to reflect the growing trend of “traditional” markers of adulthood (completion of education, leaving the parental home, marriage, parenthood, permanent employment) being achieved later and later, and in varying configurations, among young adults today. This is reflected in many of the respondents in our study, who were past adolescence but without many of the life-course markers associated with normative (mid-twentieth-century) adulthood, such as marriage or children. Their very involvement in raves, clubs and nightlife can be seen as indicative of performing a youth or emerging adulthood identity (Grazian 2008) and peak substance use is also associated with this life stage (Arnett 2005).

Respondents identified with 12 distinct ethnic groups, and some identified their ethnicity as “mixed.” However, the majority of respondents (66%) identified with only one ethnicity. The largest single ethnic group was Chinese (22%), followed by Filipino (16%), Vietnamese (11%) and Cambodian (10%). Other groups represented in our sample included Indian, Korean, Japanese, Thai, Laotian, Pakistani, Taiwanese, and Indonesian. The majority of respondents were born in the US (69%) and more than half (51%) were native to California. Most of the foreign-born respondents (59%) immigrated to the US at age 5 or younger. The majority (90%) of respondents had at least one parent who was born in Asia, and more than three-quarters (77%) came from families where both parents were Asian immigrants. Although we did take into account possible differences in rates of drug and alcohol use, and attitudes about consumption and intoxication on the basis of ethnonational group or nativity (Fazio et al. 2010), these factors will not be discussed at length in this analysis. We found that there were no significant differences in attitudes about intoxication across ethnonational groups within our sample of Asian American young adults.

Determining socioeconomic status or class in young adult samples is often somewhat difficult (Casswell et al. 2003; Winkeldby et al 1992). Their educational levels may not yet be complete and the incomes of young people in school or just entering the workforce can sometimes be misleading. In a sample with a wide age range such as this, we have respondents who are entirely dependent on parental support as well as those who have been independent for a decade. That said, there appears to be a fair degree of socioeconomic diversity in the background of the young adults we interviewed. Approximately half (48%) came from a family where at least one parent has a bachelors-level degree or higher. While some were the children of doctors, entrepreneurs, and other professionals, a significant minority—approximately 25%—of the young people we interviewed grew up in working-class families who sometimes faced great economic hardship. Roughly one-third (34%) of all respondents worked full-time, while an additional 37% were employed part-time. Of those respondents who were not currently working, 51% of them did so by choice, of whom 84% were students. Those respondents who were employed at the time of the interview worked a median of 33 hours per week and received, on average, \$1350 per month from their job. Employment was listed as the primary source of income for 58.4% of all respondents, followed by support from family (15%), scholarships and financial aid (5%), and drug sales (4%). Fifty-one percent of the respondents were currently in school, and 66%

had been in school at some point in the previous year. Of those who were not in school, 59% had already completed a bachelors-level degree or higher. A small sub-group of the sample (5%) did not complete high school and were not currently pursuing a degree.

Alcohol and drug use in the sample

Given that this was initially a “club drugs” study, such substances were well represented in terms of lifetime use by the sample. All respondents in the sample had used at least one type of alcohol, and 244 of the 250 had used marijuana. The most commonly used “club drug” was ecstasy, which was used by 94% of all respondents in their lifetimes, followed by mushrooms (64%), methamphetamine (42%), and LSD/Acid (37%). Prescription opiates/pain killers, were the only other drugs that were tried by more than half of the sample (55%); other common drugs were cocaine (50%), nitrous oxide (32%), prescription amphetamines (23%) and prescription tranquilizers (21%).

Although alcohol use was not one of our inclusion criteria, all but three of our respondents had used alcohol in the previous year. More than half of all respondents used some form of alcohol at least once per week, on average, with the most frequently-consumed type of alcohol being beer, followed by liquor and wine. The preferred contexts of alcohol use varied, although they used all types of alcohol most frequently in the company of friends and few reported consuming alcohol frequently while alone. Respondents used beer most frequently at clubs/bars (30%) and private parties (30%), whereas wine was used most frequently in private homes (52%). Liquor was, by far, most closely tied to the club and bar scene, with nearly half of all respondents listing it as their most frequent context of liquor use. Finally, despite the commonly-held belief (including by many of our respondents) that alcohol use is incompatible with or non-normative in the rave scene, 42% of all respondents say that they have used some type of alcohol while at a rave.

THE ROLE OF INTOXICATION

Alcohol intoxication and sociability

Some of our respondents’ narratives about alcohol intoxication fit squarely with the issues emphasized by anthropologists, namely the connection between alcohol consumption and sociality. Consequently, it is not surprising that young people’s intoxication, like their drinking, is “primarily a social phenomenon typically occurring in public places” (Leigh & Lee, 2008, p. 53).

Many of our respondents described their alcohol consumption and intoxication as a central part of socializing with their friends:

At every social event that you go to, there's alcohol ... Before going out we would, like, go to somebody's room and then just like pound 'em down, before we went out. And then when we got there.... Pre-drink, and then drink there, and then post-drink and just drink all night, yeah. And actually, all of my friends in college drank to some extent (Cindy, age 26).²

²All names used to identify respondents are pseudonyms.

While Cindy drank alcohol with a close group of friends, others discussed the enjoyment of drinking in a larger group. Ron (29) described how he needed to be with a lot of people when drinking, not just with a few: “I only drink when I go to clubs or raves or whatever, around with people. You know, to have a good time. I like to be around a whole lotta people who like to go drink.” Part of the pleasure of drinking for Ron was the pleasure of being in a crowd or a mass of people. In these examples, the social context of alcohol consumption is not incidental but fundamental to the whole experience.

It is not simply that the club was the appropriate environment in which to enjoy alcohol, but also that alcohol was described as essential for engaging in such social settings. For many of the respondents, drinking and getting drunk was not only a social activity; it was an activity that they undertook purposefully in order to become more sociable. Throughout their interviews, they emphasized that drinking and becoming drunk allowed them to have more confidence and more easily relate to others. “It’s easier to talk to people” noted Clara (25), because it helped her to “loosen up.” Maly (15) described it as a feeling of being more open to others. Norma (17) describes the effects of alcohol as allowing her to be more sociable: “It makes you more outgoing, and it, it makes you like, yeah, it’s just like sociable ... Actually, um, I get a lot more talkative, and like, I get kind of more touchy-feely ... I’m just like really friendly and stuff.” A key metaphor used by these young people was alcohol’s help in “loosening them up.”

The young men and women we interviewed cited a number of reasons why they desired to “loosen up.” Some emphasized that it was important because they were normally “on edge.” For example, Skye (25) remarked that loosening up was important because she always had her “guard up,” so that “when I’m drinking I’m able to like be more relaxed and be more open and be more myself ... I’m more relaxed, and that allows me to be more sociable. Because otherwise I feel like I’m on edge. Or I feel like I am just, I’m aware of too many things, I guess.” Skye also talked about alcohol relieving the stress and anxiety in her life and Wade (27) calls alcohol a “stress-reliever.” Alcohol, in these narratives, allows one to relax, de-stress, be more open, or to be more one’s real self.

In these examples we also see the repeated use of the image of “opening up.” Alcohol allows them to open up, whereas in their everyday lives they are, by implication, more closed off. Some, but not all, of these young men and women argue that their Asian or ethnic culture has shaped them to be shy, closed off, or “repressed,” and that alcohol allows them to act differently. Diem (16) explained: “I think I’m shy regularly, but then, um, yeah, when I have alcohol, then I’m not shy. And, I’m just, I just act different. I’m more jolly and happy.” Being shy was not a feeling experienced only by the young women; young men also admitted to it, especially when dealing with girls (see also Abrahamson, 2006; Leigh & Lee, 2008). For example, Phirun (25) described how after he had been drinking and was “buzzing” he was able to interact with girls in a more dynamic way:

You ain't shy talking to nobody at the club, you could be by yourself.... It's like if I'm sober and I'm dancing with a girl, I'll be like, I just dance with her. But if I'm on alcohol, I'm buzzing, 'Hey, what's up? What's your name? You look nice tonight.'

...You know, 'you got that dance move.' But if I'm sober, I don't say all that, I just, that's the difference.

Being buzzed meant that he felt cool and more relaxed: "I feel cool, like, 'Yeahhh, cool and I don't feel myself. Yesss.' I'm relaxing, my, my mind is chillin' ... And I'm not shy to talk to nobody. And if somebody hit me, I don't feel nuthin'. (Laughs.) That's how it is." Whereas Skye describes alcohol as allowing her to be herself, Phirun enjoys the fact that while intoxicated he *doesn't* feel himself. In both cases, though, the respondents describe alcohol as relaxing and as a key aid for allowing them to navigate the social space of the dance club.

These examples highlight the extent to which our respondents describe positive benefits of alcohol intoxication particularly within the context of the dance club. Alcohol, in these narratives, can crucially and positively shape social interactions, allowing them to open up, loosen up, and meet new people, particularly for romantic encounters. While to some degree this fits with the anthropological emphasis on sociality (e.g., Partanen, 1991; Paton-Simpson, 1996; MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969), these narratives also resonate with the more contemporary discussions of young people's substance use and intoxication practices being in part a response to the uncertainties and risks of life in late modern society (Garland, 2001; Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Martinic and Measham, 2008; Measham, 2008), in their comments about drinking as a response to "being on edge." The discussions of the sociable aspects of drinking did not always emphasize heavy drinking or being intoxicated, *per se*. Other narratives, though, did privilege this element. One noticeable discourse in the interviews concerned heavy drinking: drinking and getting intoxicated were overwhelmingly described as "fun."

Being intoxicated is fun

In examining the meaning of intoxication, cross-cultural anthropologists have consistently emphasized the importance of pleasure and enjoyment associated with the consumption experience, whether that be the chemical and physiological reactions or and the users' interaction with others in particular milieus. Pleasurable descriptions of altered states - happiness, freedom, euphoria - from psychoactive substances including alcohol have been recorded since prehistoric times (Rudgley 1993). Yet despite pleasure being so integral to intoxication, it is a contentious matter for which there has been much silence in the academy and in public discourses (Hunt et al., 2008; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004). Having fun is a consistent feature to emerge from our respondents' accounts of alcohol intoxication and yet it is easy to lose sight of this aspect when reading studies of risk factors contributing to binge drinking and alcohol-related problems. Yet, it seems impossible to fully grapple with the context and meaning of intoxication without keeping the desire for fun or pleasure centrally in mind (Brain et al., 2000; Park, 2004; Measham & Brain, 2005). Pleasure is articulated as fun, happiness, euphoria, energy, liberation and the losing of one's self to the moment. While much of the research in the drug and alcohol fields has tended to ignore issues of pleasure, this is less true in the majority of socio-cultural studies which have highlighted the pleasurable features of attending dance events (Pini, 2001; Duff, 2007; Moore 2008; Westhaver 2005), whether that be obtaining an ecstatic experience (Malbon, 1999), or enjoying the music (Bennett, 2000). The significance of fun or pleasure was strongly apparent in our respondents' narratives and was particularly associated with

discussions of heavy drinking or intoxication. For example, as Edwin (24) remarked when asked about being drunk, he replied “It was fun, it was just like more... more...” Fun and excess defined the experience of intoxication for these respondents.

In these discussions, our respondents describe wanting to get intoxicated and enjoying this sensation immensely. “I felt great,” said Deepak (24), “When I would get drunk, I was a fun drunk, you know.” Reena (22) also extolled how good it was to be intoxicated and describes how enjoyable her intoxicated evening was. She was “completely deliriously silly and happy and just funnya fun, drunken, delirious night (laughs). You just completely let go of any sort of guards you have. You're very, you have no inhibitions, you're laughing a lot louder, everything is just funnier.” Kiri (19), described alcohol intoxication as “ a good feeling (laughs). 'Cause you were surrounded with friends and...we were just laughing and, hanging out ... you feel good inside, like you'll feel free (laughs).” Finally, Nadia (24) said that she was “the type of person that when I drink, I get really happy. I'm a happy drunk... So I'm a happy drunk, lots of fun times with friends ...” In contrast to our previous study (Hunt et al. 2010), where ravers predominated over clubbers, and respondents frequently cited the angry drunk, who is prone to fights, violence, or sexual harassing, in the current study, the image of the “happy drunk” or the “fun drunk” came up much more often. This is not to say that there were no discussions of the negative effects of alcohol use in our sample; indeed, our respondents described experiences where their own excessive alcohol use put them into risky and dangerous situations, and where they engaged in violent or otherwise regrettable behavior, or were the victims of similar behaviors of others. Negative issues connected to alcohol discussed by respondents included violence in clubs associated with drinking, inappropriate drunken behavior leading also to conflict, and a number of personal accounts of where our respondents drank so heavily that they blacked out and when having regained consciousness had little or no memory of their prior behaviors. In addition, a small number of respondents discussed the experience of “flushing” or what some called “Asian glow” in response to alcohol use, and these respondents typically moderated their alcohol use to avoid it; however this came up in only a handful of interviews. Overall, negative effects were much less central to the narratives of most of our respondents’ discussions of alcohol use, particularly when describing alcohol-using behaviors within the club scene.

Degrees of intoxication: getting buzzed, not drunk

In their study of youthful drinking in Italy, Beccaria & Guidoni (2002) argue that their respondents identified a “threshold” between becoming “tipsy” and getting drunk. A similar threshold existed for our respondents who distinguished between being “buzzed” and being drunk. Many of our respondents remarked that they really enjoyed being buzzed. “I love the buzz” remarks Deepak, as does Oscar (22). When asked why he liked alcohol he replied that it was a “cool little buzz”:

It's just how it makes you feel. You know what I'm saying? Like you get this, cool little buzz, cool little high, and...and, you know, you could be dumb and not feel stupid.... It make me feel like stupid. Like, just acting a fool. Dancing. Being hella goofy. You know. Talking shit to your friends. Just be hella playful like. That's how I feel.

However to achieve this buzz, some respondents noted that it was important not to become intoxicated too often. “Like, you can't do it too much. You know what I'm saying? Like, doing too much it takes away, you know what I'm saying, the buzz. You know, like, you gotta like, recoup. And then, you know what I'm saying, save it, save all that energy, all that, all that foolishness for the weekend. You know.” Drinking to intoxication too often, they said, diminished the effects of the experience or made it less enjoyable as it can take away from the positive effects of the buzz, making negative effects, such as hangovers, more dominant.

Beccaria & Guidoni have suggested that this threshold between tipsy and drunk “signifies the limit beyond which one believes and/or knows that one loses control over one's actions; it is the point where the negative effects predominate over the positive effects” (Beccaria & Guidoni, 2002, p. 315). In terms of seeking the buzz but not getting drunk, Irene (22), for example, emphasizes how important it was not to get drunk when she was dancing, but to stay instead “at the buzz stage.” When Irene was asked to clarify what was different between being buzzed and being drunk she replied that “Being buzzed. I think you're still aware of what you're doing. But, you'll notice like things still, while you're buzzed. But whereas you're drunk, I think you're just totally impaired, like you're stumbling around, you're, I don't think you really know what you're doing... or what you're saying either.” This mirrors what Measham (2004a) has described as a “controlled loss of control,” in which she argues that given the increasing tendency towards a growing “Culture of control” (Garland 2001), intoxication may be an attempt by young people to regain some control over their lives (Measham 2008). Being in control and not totally impaired was emphasized by many respondents, although some focused on the impairment of others, not themselves. For example, Felicia (19) felt that some of her friends were unable to control themselves once they started drinking and because of this she didn't like alcohol, except in small amounts.

Like sometimes like I see alcohol kinda alters the way people act. ... they get so senseless and with some of my friends like when they drink ...you just can't control them. And they can't control themselves. the one thing with alcohol like people can get outta hand with it.

A number of respondents discussed appropriate and inappropriate behaviors when drinking in the club scene. In general acceptable and unacceptable behavior was defined by notions of control and levels of perceptible intoxication. Although some respondents (discussed below) described a desire to lose control and become “wasted” or drunk at clubs, many argued that becoming too wasted or too out of control was frowned upon at clubs, where intoxication was expected to be less obvious than in the rave setting. Max (31) told us that at traditional raves “the environment was much looser ... it wasn't in like a club environment, where they're serving drinks.... rave's a kinda loose.” According to Megan, (22), who asked herself the question: “Why would you be shit-faced and floored at the rave, and not shit-faced and floored at the club?” replied that in the club setting, it was not okay to be “wasted” as one might be at a rave. At a club “you had to keep your cool.” Many respondents noted the greater acceptability of alcohol use in clubs compared to raves, where ecstasy was the preferred substance. But obvious displays of alcohol intoxication, or intoxication of any sort, were viewed more negatively in the club context. These two settings of young adult nightlife

leisure-- raves and clubs-- were described as having substantially different norms regarding acceptable levels and displays of intoxication. Whereas respondents described reveling in and openly performing intoxication (especially ecstasy intoxication) at raves, they felt that they had to be much more circumspect when at commercial dance clubs. This was for a variety of reasons-- some attributed it to the smaller environment and tighter security of many dance clubs, for others the key element was the substance used (ecstasy as the most prominent substance at raves vs. alcohol at clubs, although respondents did report using both substances in both settings) and other narratives focused more on the “vibe,” “style,” or “ethos” of these different settings as the key factor shaping acceptable parameters of intoxicated behavior.

But not all respondents perceived the possibility of losing control or being “drunk” in a negative manner, even in the context of dance clubs. In analyzing their discourses about intoxication, a central theme that emerges is the extent to which drinking moderately was not sufficient; it was necessary to drink enough to become completely intoxicated. This point is emphasized by Clara (25), who describes how she didn’t drink if there was only a short time to drink or if there was insufficient alcohol:

I stress a lot during the week, so it's kind of like a stress reliever. You go out and have fun. But, I won't drink by myself. And if I drink, it has to be in mass consumption. I will not drink if I only have a little bit of time to drink, or if there's only a little bit to drink.... Because then I won't get the full effect. There's no point. I don't really like drinking itself. I just like the effect it gives me. And if I can't get that full effect, then I won't do it.

It is not drinking itself that Clara likes. Instead, she prizes alcohol’s effects: the effects of “mass consumption” of alcohol, in other words, intoxication. Otherwise, she says, “there’s no point.” Intoxication is not an unfortunate side-effect of drinking, here, but is her primary goal. Weekend intoxication is presented as a counterbalance or antidote to weekday stress.

While for some of our respondents it was important to get the buzz, but not to become drunk, others specifically wanted to lose control. In fact, it was precisely the state of being drunk that they sought. To use Measham and Brain’s (2005) expression they wanted to achieve “determined drunkenness,” (see also Keane, 2009). The desire to attain this state of determined drunkenness can be seen in Tanish (20) who argues that it was precisely the fact that he didn’t “have to worry about controlling himself” that he liked about becoming drunk on hard liquor.

I love hard liquor ... That's the best stuff ever.... it comes back to that control thing, where I can just not be in control for a while. I don't have to worry.... I drink to a point where I am kinda passing out and acting stupid and, you know. And I, I think it goes back to the fact that it's that lack of having to worry about control, and it's also a lack of having to worry about presentation so much.

Tanish didn’t want to avoid losing control; he actively sought a loss of control. As with Oscar, above, acting or being stupid is seen as a source of release or pleasure. As Joey (24) remarked:

You know, it's, it's really tough to say, sometimes I just have this urge to get wasted. And sometimes I don't. Sometimes I just want one or two drinks. But ... if I've had a stressful week, or if I've had a boring week, or if my friends wanna get fucked up, I'm like, 'OK,' you know. I kinda get this desire...that's yearning to get kind of this out-of-body, out-of-mind experience.

These respondents did not wish to remain in control when they became intoxicated, they wanted to get “wasted.” And again, in part this is presented as a response to stress or the pressure of everyday life.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have attempted to analyze the meaning, context, and practices of consumption among a sample of young adult Asian Americans participating in nightlife in the San Francisco area. It is clear that many of our respondents express a strong affinity to becoming intoxicated and that nightlife scenes are an important context for this.

As many researchers before us have pointed out, drinking and becoming drunk is a highly sociable activity, which can also be clearly seen in our respondents' narratives. Alcohol consumption and intoxication was primarily discussed by the young adults in our study in the context of socializing with friends. The pleasures of drinking were largely bound up with sociality and commensality and primary motivations for drinking included making it easier to socialize, to loosen up, or open up. Therefore, our data would seem to support the idea that intoxication is inextricably bound up with socializing, and that a strong association exists between drinking, sociability and intoxication (Karp, 1980; Partanen, 1991).

However, an alternative explanation for becoming intoxicated, set forth by contemporary cultural criminologists, is that becoming drunk is a way for young people to cope with the stresses and boredom of everyday life (Garland 2001; Measham 2008). This theme also appears within our respondents' narratives. In attempting to explain the increasing rates of intoxication among young people, these researchers have identified complex factors at the macro, meso, and micro-levels that influence contemporary youth drinking patterns. At the macro- or societal level, they have identified changes occurring in post-modern or post-industrial society, in which transformation in the labor market has led young people today to “have to negotiate a set of risks...largely unknown to their parents” (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p. 1). At the meso-level, researchers have emphasized the marked changes within the nighttime economy and the redevelopment and rejuvenation of the inner urban areas into zones which provide “highly structured provision for hedonistic economic activity” (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007, p. 451) in which alcohol is central (see also Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hadfield, 2009). Finally, at the micro-, individual or group level, researchers have argued that young people today are experiencing the paradox existing in the post-industrial consumer society where they feel, at the same time, both ontologically insecure and over-controlled (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007, p. 447, see also Garland, 2001). Given all these developments, young people seek intoxication not only for the “inherent excitement of the alcoholic rush” (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007, p. 447) but their desire for

“determined drunkenness” (Measham, 2008) is a way of experiencing self-actualization and self-expression thereby seizing some sense of control over their lives.

Elements of stress can also be identified within the narratives of the young people we interviewed, especially when our respondents discuss the need for alcohol to help them “loosen up.” In needing to loosen up, a number of our respondents referred to alcohol as a way of relieving stress or tension-- ranging from having a few drinks to take the “edge” off to wanting to get completely “wasted,” “drunk,” or “out of control” as a response to the stress they face in their lives. As MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) noted intoxication allows people, and in this case young people, a period of “time-out” from a world of self-control (Griffin et al., 2009).

Beyond the instrumental motivations of drinking for easing social interactions or for relieving stress, our young respondents framed their desires to drink and become intoxicated around pleasure or fun. These young adults are looking for fun and excessive drinking and intoxication is seen as one reliable way that they can have fun within their friendship groups.

While the pleasure of alcohol consumption is, of course, not a new concept, it is an issue that often gets neglected, both in much of the focus on the risk factors for and problems associated with drinking that dominates much of the American alcohol scholarship, as well as in cultural research that focuses too exclusively on the functions and instrumental motivations for intoxication. In fact the relative absence of the discussion of pleasure in substance use as led some researchers to argue that pleasure “the great unmentionable” (Moore and Valverde 2000, p.528; Hunt and Evans 2008). The continued minimization of the issue of pleasure within much alcohol and drug research means that a central component of why people use mind altering substances is often ignored.³ As Parker and his colleagues have remarked, “we need to place pleasure in the formula. Drugs (*both legal and illegal*) are used because they give enjoyment” (1998, p.133). The pleasures and fun of intoxication, however, are not without limits and the respondents discussed their attempts to carefully modulate their level of intoxication, to get buzzed enough without getting too drunk. However, these attempts at achieving control were not always successful, nor did all respondents desire the same level of control, with some young adults actively seeking an “out of control” intoxication experience.

The meaning of intoxication, as with the meaning of drinking, does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in particular social settings, in the context of perceived potential consequences, and is accomplished through socially situated practices (Windle, 2003; Duff, 2007; Zinberg, 1984). While this “context” includes the physical space or environment of alcohol consumption, we draw on the work of Moore (1993) and others who argue that an interpretive focus on setting or context must also examine the broader social or cultural milieu in which substance use takes place, and the wider beliefs, sanctions or values that actors bring to their intoxication (Duff, 2007; Parker et al., 1998; Tseng and Seidman, 2007; Zinberg, 1984). The meaning of intoxication for the young adults we interviewed varied

³We do not wish to suggest no research has been done on pleasure and substance use, but instead to emphasize the extent to which such issues have been generally neglected. For examples of research on pleasure, substance use and addiction see Duff (2007); Ettorre (1989); Hayward (2002); Moore (2008); Moore and Measham (2008); Peele (1985); and Warburton (1994; 1996).

importantly based on the setting of drinking. For example, the two nightlife scenes of raves vs. clubs were substantially different, in many respondents' estimation, in terms of the desirability of intoxication and the norms for drunken comportment. Whereas it was seen as acceptable within raves to embrace intoxication, many argued that within the commercial dance club scene there was increased normative pressure to appear in control of one's drinking and one's behavior. Many of these young adults' discussions had resonances with the ideas of "controlled loss of control," of Measham (2004). Nevertheless, some respondents did desire a level of intoxication that was more "out of control," and even some of those who did frame their drinking and intoxication in terms of a desire to remain in control were not always able to achieve this, as evinced, for example in their admissions of sometimes drinking to blackout or regretting various drunken behaviors the next day.

In focusing on the role of intoxication in our respondents' ability and desire to socialize, and on the pleasure or fun of the experience, we have emphasized the cohesive importance of drinking and intoxication (Heath, 1987). However, it would be inaccurate to leave our discussion at this point, solely emphasizing the integrative nature of intoxication. By concentrating on the positive experiences of heavy drinking one potential aim of this paper is to provide a minor corrective to the extensive literature charting the many problems associated with youthful drinking, which dominates in much of the American literature on young adult drinking, especially college drinking (Wechsler et al. 1994; Perkins et al., 2002; Ham & Hope, 2003). However, we would not wish to under-estimate the potentially divisive behaviors and consequences of heavy drinking and intoxication. Such elements have been noted by cultural criminologists (Hadfield, 2006; Winlow & Hall, 2006; Hayward & Hobbs, 2007), who have documented the extent to which the contemporary nighttime economy and the pursuit of pleasure is strongly associated with alcohol-related problems and especially violence. Within our respondents' narratives, detailed accounts of the more negative issues associated with heavy drinking and intoxication can also be found. Nevertheless, by far the dominant theme in our respondents' discussions has been the emphasis on the pleasure and enjoyment they experience when they achieve "the cool little buzz."

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The research discussed in this paper is drawn on interviews with a sample of Asian American young adults involved in nightlife in San Francisco, attempting to grapple with meanings of intoxication for this group of young adults. What meanings do young people give to becoming intoxicated? What type of intoxication do they strive for? How do they talk about their intoxication? We have seen how becoming intoxicated is a central feature of being able to socialize with their friends, an essential part of the night out, and something that allows them to open up or loosen up. Our respondents couched their experiences of intoxication in a discourse of pleasure and a sense of "feeling great". As one young woman noted, she enjoyed "being deliriously silly and happy." These are the responses of young people who do not regret their intoxication, but look back on it with a sense of fondness. In fact for some, far from being concerned about losing control, they express a strong desire to do so.

Further research is needed to situate their experiences in relation or comparison to other subgroups of young adults—including young adults from other racial/ethnic groups as well as from other localities or regions. Future work would also benefit by examining differences within these subgroups, such as differences in gender or sexuality. While studies on alcohol and gender have long found that gender is a strong predictor of drinking behavior, to date little research, with some notable exceptions, have examined how gender influences the *meaning* of alcohol intoxication for young men and women (for some exceptions see: Demant and Torronen, 2011; DeVisser et al, 2007; Lindsay, 2006; Montemurro & McClure, 2005; Peralta & Jauk 2011; Young 2005). This is an area of research that is important to pursue and one which could reveal some insightful data, especially for designing gender sensitive interventions.

In conducting these analyses and writing this paper we have been very much influenced by much recent cultural scholarship out of the UK and other parts of Europe, which is attempting to grapple with the meaning of intoxication for young people today (Griffin et al., 2009; Martinic and Measham 2008; Measham, 2004; Measham and Brain, 2005; Measham and Ostergaard, 2009 Szmigin et al., 2008). We have attempted to bring some of this research and their approach to an American context, in contrast to the epidemiological and quantitative bent of dominant American approaches to young adult drinking. To develop further such a project, it will be important in future research to step back from the micro-level meanings of intoxication found within in-depth interviews, to also include a broader socio-cultural context to better understand convergences and divergences in intoxication meanings and experiences in these different societies, including examining the impact of different policy and economic contexts for the alcohol industry and nighttime economies (e.g., Hadfield 2009; Moloney et al. 2009; Hunt et al. 2011b).

Biographies

Geoffrey Hunt is Professor at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug research at the University of Aarhus, Denmark and Senior Scientist at the Institute for Scientific Analysis in San Francisco. Dr. Hunt is a social and cultural anthropologist, who has had 30 years experience in planning, conducting, and managing research in the field of drugs, alcohol and youth studies. He is currently the Principal Investigator on an NIH project on Asian American Gay and Bisexual Men, Club Drugs, and Nightlife. In addition, Dr. Hunt has been involved in a number of large scale comparative international projects on such issues as drugs and the Nighttime Economy and drug and alcohol treatment. He has published widely in the field of substance use studies in many of the leading sociology, anthropology and criminology journals in the United States and the UK. He and colleagues have just published “Youth Drugs and Nightlife” (Routledge, 2010) and “Drugs and Culture” (Ashgate, 2011).

Molly Moloney, Ph.D., is a Sociologist at the Institute for Scientific Analysis in California. Her research has focused on a number of subject areas including: masculinities, femininities and parenthood among youth gang members; gender, sexuality, and ecstasy use in the rave scene; the regulatory environment and the changing nighttime economy; and Asian American youth and young adult illicit drug use. What connects these different projects together is an emphasis on interpretive socio-cultural inquiry that is attentive to meaning,

culture, and consumption and a focus on the intersections between identities (gender, sexual, ethnic) and substance use.

Adam Fazio received his B.A. in Sociology/Anthropology and French at Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont. He served as a research associate and project manager at the Institute for Scientific Analysis from 2007-2012 and currently works at Local Matters in Columbus, Ohio.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=250)

	%	(N)
Gender		
Male	54	135
Female	46	115
Age (mean=23.1)		
15 and Under	2	6
16-17	6	16
18-20	25	62
21-24	30	75
25-29	28	70
30 and Over	8	21
Nativity		
American Born	69	172
Immigrated at age 5 or under	18	46
Immigrated at age 6-10	5	13
Immigrated at age 11 or over	8	19
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	84	208
Homosexual	10	25
Bisexual	5	13
Other	1	3