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Robert L. Peralta

*Journal of Drug Issues* 2008 38: 373

DOI: 10.1177/002204260803800201

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jod.sagepub.com/content/38/2/373>

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# “ALCOHOL ALLOWS YOU TO NOT BE YOURSELF”: TOWARD A STRUCTURED UNDERSTANDING OF ALCOHOL USE AND GENDER DIFFERENCE AMONG GAY, LESBIAN, AND HETEROSEXUAL YOUTH

ROBERT L. PERALTA

*This paper explores how homosexual and heterosexual women and men exploit situational and behavioral aspects of alcohol consumption using alcohol-related excuses to justify divergent gender displays. Seventy-eight in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of youth are used to examine how alcohol-related excuses counteract the deviance associated with gender norm violation and ease the shame associated with inappropriate gender displays. It is in these contexts that the dynamic approach of structured action theory allows for an examination of the diverse ways in which men and women situationally construct gender. This investigation seeks to understand how situations and alcohol use contexts allow women and men to engage in and/or ignore inappropriate displays of gender. Also examined is how the “alcohol excuse” is experienced when either purposeful or accidental gender difference occurs. Conclusions illustrate the fluidity of gender, the contexts in which gender difference takes place, and the way in which excuses render gender categories unchanged.*

## INTRODUCTION

When norm violations occur (e.g., gender norm violations), a common response is to excuse or justify such violations. The accounts literature as referenced by Scott and Lyman (1981) fundamentally distinguishes between excuses (e.g., “it was wrong, but it wasn’t my fault”) and justifications (e.g., “I did it, but it wasn’t wrong”). Scott and Lyman’s distinction enables us to understand how excuses

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**Robert L. Peralta**, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Akron. Dr. Peralta’s areas of interest and expertise include deviance, gender, social inequality, alcohol, and interpersonal violence. Alcohol use in intimate partner violence and in the construction of gender is the focus of his current research.

and justifications are used to deflect deviant labels. Social rituals, such as alcohol use, can serve to relax the justification and discrediting of action (Montemurro & McClure, 2005). Research on alcohol use as an excuse or the deviance disavowal phenomenon (Leonard, 2002; Scully & Marolla, 1984) suggests that alcohol use often serves as a resource for the neutralization of norm violations (Montemurro & McClure, 2005). The time out or excuse value of alcohol use is thought to have meaning for the management or maintenance of self-identity, to retain a rationale of the self, and to excuse deviant or undesirable behavior (Luckenbill, 1977; McCaghy, 1968; Rhodes & Cusick, 2002; Tryggvesson, 2004).

MacAndrew and Edgerton's (1969) classic study on drunken comportment empirically demonstrated how many societies establish alcohol use as a time-out period. The time-out period allows social space for otherwise unacceptable behavior to occur. In other words, intoxication can provide a context of freedom from responsibility. More recently, Cohen and Lederman (1998) report that alcohol is used to deny responsibility for engaging in sexual practices deemed socially unacceptable. Cohen and Lederman's (1998) findings, however, are limited in that they refer only to women's deviance situated in casual heterosexual encounters.

While alcohol use has been associated with masculinity construction (West, 2001), little research has examined the meaning of alcohol for women who construct alternative gender expressions. Moreover, few studies have explained how alcohol use might be used to excuse gender-violating behavior. As an exception, Parks (1999) studied the social meaning of alcohol for lesbians. Parks, in part, concluded that alcohol use among lesbians and the social contexts in which drinking took place (e.g., gay bars) served to provide an escape from heterosexism and homophobia; public alcohol use also facilitated new social networks and identities.<sup>1</sup>

Little research has examined alcohol use in conjunction with the doing of "gender difference" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Similarly, little qualitative research in particular has examined women's social drinking and the contexts in which women drink (see Montemurro & McClure, 2005). Most research on women and alcohol use has focused on alcoholism, problem drinking, or drinking in response to a male partner's drinking (Jersild, 2001; National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism, 1999; Wiseman, 1991). Likewise, until recently, little research has been conducted on alcohol use among gay individuals. This may be due in part to the difficulties of operationalizing what it means to be "gay" and the difficulties associated with research on hidden populations (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005).

The recent research on gay and lesbian populations appears to suggest those who have had same sex partners have similar or higher prevalence rates of alcohol use compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Amadio, 2006; Eisenberg & Wechsler, 2003; Finlon, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Hughes et al., 2006; Hughes & Wilsnack,

1994; Parks & Hughes, 2005; Stall et al., 2001; Trocki, 2005). Nevertheless, the prevalence rate of alcohol use among “gay” or homosexual populations has been constructed as a problem related to the stress of being marginalized, a product of heterosexism, and a tension reliever used to reduce feelings of low self-worth (Stall & Willey, 1988; Tori, 1989). Alternatively, Caceres and Cortinas (1996) interpret the higher prevalence rate of alcohol use as a social resource and as a disinhibitor. Caceres and Cortinas note that alcohol use may allow the exploration of identities rendered taboo outside the gay bar. These researchers suggest alcohol becomes a tool to negotiate sexual intimacy and to celebrate sexual differences in a safe public space. The point of alcohol use, the authors state, is “to decrease the normal agency of the people involved,” thereby creating a context where norm violations are more likely to occur (Caceres & Cortinas, 1996, p. 56). Examining alcohol use in relation to the social construction of gender expands the existing literature in terms of what social construction theory can add to the existing literature on gender in relation to drinking behavior. Below I review the alcohol use and gender literature and discuss the ways in which these literatures converge.

#### **THE SITUATED STRUCTURE AND ACTION OF GENDER, DIFFERENCE, AND ALCOHOL USE**

A dominant theme in the research literature conceptualizes gender as socially constructed (Anderson, 2002; Goffman, 1976; Kane & Schippers, 1996; Lugal, 1999; Orcutt, 1975; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Vander Ven, 2005) and suggests that the social use of alcohol may symbolically express gender, particularly masculinity (Peralta, 2005). While this conceptualization includes the recognition that femininity is subordinated to masculinity, the meaning of gendered behavior is also contextually bound in terms of where and when particular demonstrations of gender are appropriate. Men and women engage in the “doing” of gender (e.g., choice of alcoholic beverage, hairstyles, clothing, emotional expression, and displays of sexuality) appropriate to the social situation, with consequences at both the individual and group level (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Despite the potential fluidity implied by the social construction of gender, entrenched cultural and normative beliefs for men and women result in inflexible expectations for the performance of gendered behavior. Failure to do gender appropriately can result in threats to identity, embarrassment, stigma, and other negative sanctions (e.g., ostracism) (Miller et al., 2003; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Gender relations are maintained through the creation and reproduction of gendered practices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Operating within patriarchal social institutions, where femininity is devalued and masculinity exalted, men and women are expected to function within the confines of that system. The denigration of femininity and alternative forms of masculinity serve to ascend hegemonic masculinity. Conformity in many respects means to abide by a social structure where

gender has been dichotomized (Lorber, 1994). In this day to day operation, men and women engage in the doing of gender displays and practices (e.g., gendered hairstyles and clothing) (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Conforming to societal expectations is the lynchpin of regularly occurring gendered behavior. Interaction is moderated by gendered social structure (Garfinkel, 1967; Martin & Collinson, 2000). Individuals are accountable to their assigned sex and subject to condemnation for violations of gender performance depending on the situated context. Those who violate gender and sexuality norms are likely to be labeled deviant. Thus, social structure itself appears to be gendered, the performance of gender is situated, and gendered behavior reproduces structure.

Divergent gender practices have been described as forms of gender difference (Messerschmidt, 1993) or gender deviance (Cromwell, 1999; Garfinkle, 1967), and those who engage in gender difference have been referred to as transgenderists (Dozier, 2005). Messerschmidt (1993) extended West and Fenstermaker's (1995) and Connell's (1987) theories on gender to signify doing gender in different situations and with different degrees of salience. Structured action theory (SAT) (Messerschmidt, 1993, 1999) advanced sociological research on gender and gender norm violation by arguing that gender is a mechanism through which situated social action reproduces social structure. That is, normative beliefs for men and women require all participants to present, monitor, interpret and reproduce gender displays, which are structured by specific social sites, contexts, and situations.

Empirical documentation of the social processes of resistance, challenge, conflict, and change related to alternative gender constructions reveal the nature of social construction (Collins et al., 1995). Substantial resistance can be illustrated by the popularity of women's studies, "queer theory" courses, and active student organizations such as gay, lesbian, and transgendered student groups. Studying examples of gender norm violation or gender resistance in the context of alcohol use enables us to understand the fluidity of gender and the contextual basis upon which gender is dependent. Researchers have examined how gender difference is met with resistance (Leblanc, 1999) while others have noted the difficulties of successfully challenging the gender hierarchy (Hollander, 2002). Examining accidental or purposeful "gender crossing" in the context of alcohol use demonstrates how the social construction of gender operates and illuminates the structural forces that facilitate the use of alcohol.

This paper contributes to the empirical literature on alcohol use and the social construction of gender in three important ways. First, this investigation seeks to understand how contexts where alcohol use is taking place allow women and men to engage in inappropriate displays of gender or ignore the gender difference of others. Second, this study examines how the alcohol excuse is experienced when

purposeful or accidental gender difference occurs. Thirdly, the accounts literature is expanded to address the relevance of situational contexts (e.g., alcohol use) in gender construction. In this paper, I examine instances of doing gender difference as these practices relate to alcohol use. Because I focus on inappropriate gender displays, I also explore the ways in which doing gender difference is disavowed and thus a form of deviant behavior.

### THE CURRENT STUDY

In this paper, three questions are explored. First, does alcohol use motivate women and men and/or those they interact with to engage in or ignore inappropriate displays of gender? Second, how does alcohol use excuse inappropriate gender displays (e.g., gender difference)? Finally, how are accounts used in situated contexts to assuage guilt and shame associated with gender difference? The social practice of inappropriate gender displays or gender difference is defined here as engaging in nontraditional gender practices. That is, how are alcohol use accounts used to excuse men doing femininity (e.g., paying attention to appearance, wearing jewelry, sitting “lady-like”) and women doing masculinity (e.g., being assertive, restraining emotional expression, disregarding others). I broaden the study of gender by examining gender norm violations among college students.<sup>2</sup> In the analysis, I address the social construction of gender as it occurs in the context of alcohol use. Relying on SAT as my analytic framework and using Scott and Lyman’s (1981) concept of accounts as a heuristic tool, I explore students’ experiences and beliefs regarding alcohol use as an excuse for gender norm violations. I ask: What accounts do men and women provide to excuse or justify behavior that diverges from typical or expected gender displays (Goffman, 1976; Scott & Lyman, 1981)? The University Office of Human Research granted ethical approval for the project. Data were collected between 1997 and 2001.

### METHOD

#### *SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS*

Seventy-eight one-on-one in-depth interviews lasting on average 1.5 hours were conducted in the office of the primary investigator with an all-volunteer purposive 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. Thirty-two percent (N=24) reported being freshmen at the time of the interview. Participants lived both on and off campus. Seventy-one percent (N=55) of the sample were European American (EA) and 26% (N=20) were African American (AA). Two respondents were Hispanic men and one

respondent self-described as Asian and was male. Fifty-three percent (N=41) were male, and 47% were female (N=37). Seventy-two percent (N=56) self-identified as heterosexual, 22% (N=17) self-identified as homosexual, and the remaining 6% (N=5) self-identified as bisexual. The mean age was 20 years old (SD = 2.75). Fifteen percent (N=11) of the sample reported being a member of a fraternity or sorority. The majority of participants (50%) were in the College of Arts and Sciences at the time of the study. Thirty percent had undeclared majors and the remainder were either in the College of Engineering, Business, or Fine Arts.

#### *SAMPLE RECRUITMENT AND ELIGIBILITY*

Undergraduate attendance at the target university 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. To prevent a response from a narrow or specific grouping of participants (e.g., heavy drinkers or abstainers), announcements and notices utilized general and nonspecific language. Flyers and announcements called for participation in a study on experiences with alcohol use among college students. In addition to this statement about the topic of the study, contact information of the principal investigator, a confidentiality statement, and the stamp of approval from the Institutional Review Board were included.

Twenty-one percent of the sample (N=16, all EA, all heterosexual) were recruited from the Dean of Students Office. These participants were undergoing disciplinary procedures for alcohol-related violations at the time of the study.<sup>3</sup> Participants were informed of the study with the same flyer described above and were asked if they would be interested in participating in the study. Minority participants were purposely oversampled to give representation to those who have been traditionally excluded from research. Difficulty recruiting minority participants (AA and gay/lesbian students) prompted the use of \$10 stipends to encourage their participation.

#### *INSTRUMENT*

A semi-structured open-ended interview guide consisting of 12 guiding questions was developed and pilot tested by the author. Many questions were presented in projective form to reduce the response effect on threatening questions (see Sudman & Bradburn, 1982). Demographic questions were asked in addition to questions regarding drinking quantity, frequency, attitudes toward drinking, reasons for drinking, expectations of alcohol use, and the consequences of drinking. Some of the questions specific to the study were (a) what does drinking and getting drunk mean to you? (b) what have been your experiences with alcohol? (c) what are your expectations of people who get drunk? and (d) what goes through your mind

when you see someone drinking or getting drunk? Respondents were asked if they perceived gender differences for each question.

### ANALYSIS

The paper uses in-depth interviews to gain a nuanced understanding of young people's attitudes and beliefs about gender norms, gender norm violations, and alcohol use. Qualitative methods, grounded theory in particular, provide the tools necessary to address the study of gender difference in the context of alcohol use. Grounded theory allows respondents to inform the development of theory (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data presented here are based on over 100 hours of interview data. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim with participant consent. Themes were inductively generated from the data using a line-by-line open coding method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). An initial content analysis was conducted for patterns of responses emerging from the data. After this initial analysis, a more thorough examination of the transcripts was conducted for emergent themes. I utilized a constant-relational approach to gender (Emirbayer, 1997), thus not abandoning the central tenets of gender. My analytic goals were to examine the relationship between gender norm violation and alcohol use and to generate concepts and hypotheses directly from the data (Glaser, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was necessary to read through all interview data several times with a focus on accounts of activities that reflected gender construction. In qualitative research, reliability refers to the stability of responses to multiple coders of data sets (Creswell, 2007). The author and a research assistant compared and agreed upon the names of codes, the passages coded, and the way in which passages were coded. Only agreed upon codes were used in the final analysis. Once coding and analysis were complete, I selected representative accounts from the data to illustrate each theme. These accounts were used as illustrations of themes stemming from the analytic framework used in organizing data coding and analysis.

### FINDINGS

The data in this study suggest that participants perceive that the expression of gender can be interrupted or impaired due to the "physiological" effect of alcohol on the body. Although the use of alcohol can justify behavior that aligns with prevailing gender norms (Peralta & Cruz, 2006), alcohol use also appears to excuse behavior that deviates from societal expectations. If women or men begin to exhibit gender practices that do not correspond with their assigned gender, the use of alcohol appears to provide an effective and legitimate excuse for gender deviation.

At the onset of the study, I did not expect deviance to be defined by gender norm violations. Participants describe how alcohol use functioned as an excuse for bad or

embarrassing behaviors, which I refer to as gender norm violations or doing gender difference. It was striking that many of the behaviors discussed were deviant in that they violated gender norms. Early on and throughout the study, this type of deviance was described by participants in virtually every interview, albeit in varying degrees. Collectively, these gender deviations came to be interpreted as a significant emergent theme. Grounded in these data, I found that alcohol use provided a context where differential constructions of gender took place. For the purposes of this paper, this theme is explored separately for men and women. Thus the findings section is divided into two sections: (a) purposefully doing gender differently among women in the situated context of alcohol use and (b) purposeful gender difference and accidental gender blunders among men in the situated context of alcohol use. Table 1 below corresponds with sections 1 and 2 described above. This table displays the number of participants who used alcohol as an excuse for gender difference while in college and the number of participants who recalled receiving at least one alcohol-related excuse from peers during college for a gender norm violation. The table is meant to provide data on the distribution of themes and is not meant to be generalized beyond those interviewed.

While previous research suggests that alcohol is used to express traditional or emphasized gender practices, I focus on the management of stigma associated with deviating from one's assigned gender whether the behavior in question was purposeful or not. Below, accounts are used to illustrate how the use of alcohol allows individuals to successfully excuse gendered behaviors deemed deviant. Participants provided many examples of using alcohol as an excuse for deviant behavior. Students report that their excuses (e.g., "I wouldn't have done it if I weren't

**TABLE 1**  
**PERCENT OF MEN AND WOMEN USING ALCOHOL-RELATED EXCUSES FOR EXPRESSING GENDER DIFFERENCE AND PERCENT OF MEN AND WOMEN RECEIVING ALCOHOL-RELATED EXCUSES FOR EXPERIENCING GENDER DIFFERENCE**

	Yes % (N)	No % (N)	Total % (N)
Men using alcohol-related excuses for expressing gender difference	68.3 (28)	31.7(13)	100 (41)
Women using alcohol-related excuses for expressing gender difference	83.8 (31)	16.2 (6)	100 (37)
Men receiving an alcohol-related excuse when experiencing gender difference	73.2 (30)	26.8 (11)	100 (41)
Women receiving an alcohol-related excuse when experiencing gender difference	75.7 (28)	24.3 (9)	100 (37)

## ALCOHOL ALLOWS YOU TO NOT BE YOURSELF

drunk”) were often tied to alcohol use. Moreover, participants described how alcohol excuses were used by their friends and peers for behaviors considered bad, wrong or immoral. Given the expectation that alcohol can excuse bad behavior, it became clear that participants used alcohol not only to facilitate positive social interaction but to test the boundaries of gender norms. I address the gendered aspects of the alcohol-related contextual basis of sexuality and gender difference in the analysis that follows.

## PURPOSEFULLY DOING GENDER DIFFERENTLY AMONG WOMEN IN THE SITUATED CONTEXT OF ALCOHOL USE

The gender performance of women under the influence of alcohol looked and felt different compared to men according to participants interviewed. Consider Jenny’s (EA and heterosexual) statements, which support the purposeful deviant gender expressions engaged in by women while under the influence of alcohol:

...(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 gender difference. Given that women know their behavior is accountable to other women and men, women construct their actions as acceptable in relation to the situated context in which the behavior took place, one which involved alcohol use. Take the next account from a EA heterosexual woman as an example of how young women alter the traditional mode of doing femininity in order to suit their needs as individuals instead of as girls or women.

*Julia:* 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.

Above, Julia expressed how strict female specific appearance norms are momentarily suspended when drinking. Another EA heterosexual female student

said "...you don't go into the bathroom and like put your makeup on when you're drunk. You don't even think about it." These statements represent the preoccupation with appearance and beauty in everyday femininity performance. Julia states that women in general, when drinking, no longer need to worry about some forms of gender-appropriate behavior. In the specific social situation of the co-ed party scene, these women are challenging a feminine identity that requires attention to appearance. Alcohol use allows the culturally appropriate display of femininity to be suspended. Thus, drinking can be understood as an alluring reprieve from one labor-intensive component of doing femininity.

Alcohol use allowed women to ignore the judgment of others. Tina, an AA heterosexual female felt she was able to be freer in what she said when drinking. She states "the liquor makes you a little more free to say whatever you want." Jen and Susan (EA, heterosexual) 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.

Women constructed an inappropriately assertive, active, and outspoken gender in the situationally specific context of public alcohol use. According to these participants, these inappropriate gender displays rarely occurred in mixed gender settings, especially when alcohol was not present. EA gay women also expressed how alcohol use provided the context to escape negative labeling. In one example, sexual behavior became less constrained as described by Liz. Sex became more "enjoyable" with her partner after imbibing alcohol. In her words, sexual "inhibitions" were momentarily dismissed.

*Liz:* 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. Bodily empowerment displays are typically reserved for men, but not in the situated context of public alcohol use. She also mentions the fear of sounding pushy, which is eliminated in the situated context of alcohol use. Cindy, an EA lesbian, discusses how alcohol is used to explain sexual promiscuity. Alcohol is needed because women are not supposed to be interested in sex in the same way men are. Cindy discusses how her use of alcohol is used as an excuse to hook up with other women. Without the excuse, Cindy would face the labels of “slut” or “whore,” whereas men would be considered “studs” or “players.” Cindy states:

So I am flirting with Tina and she was sitting on my lap...we ended up hooking up...we did it another night too and I didn't want to do it if I was sober because I couldn't go back to Jane (Cindy's partner) and because me and Jane believe that the truth is more important. I told her “I was drunk both times” and that “it was no big deal.” But I wanted it to happen both times.

The account above is interesting because it reveals how the double standard of sexuality that exists for women in heterosexual space also exists, in this case, for women in the lesbian community. The unequal gendered structural arrangements can be ignored in certain situated contexts. The risk of gender assessment found in the broader culture is suspended during alcohol use. The suspension power of alcohol use affords protection against the potential discrediting of their gendered feminine identities. Liz, in a complementary illustration, points out that one of her friends becomes very sexual after using alcohol. Liz (EA, homosexual) says:

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.

Liz discussed how her friend embodied sexual aggression, which was presumptively a form of masculine behavior. Again, the situational construction of gender in this example took place in the context of alcohol use and thus facilitated this

form of construction. Many men discussed how forward women can be in initiating contact when drinking or drunk. Men expressed surprise at this forward behavior. Anthony, a EA heterosexual observes “Yeah, (women) will be more flirtatious. They will be willing to initiate the first touch.” Adrian, an AA heterosexual male, expresses his dismay at the forward behavior of an intoxicated young woman. He states:

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 deviant gender display was constructed, yet the sex category of the person engaging in the deviant construction was defined as female. Alcohol use was understood to be the cause of the deviant gender display. If gender violating behaviors did not sit well with peers, alcohol excuses were employed to contextualize gender norm violations. Individuals who privately feared that their own behavior violated their assigned gender also used alcohol as an excuse to explain away potential embarrassment. This conclusion is in part drawn from the fact that many participants freely reported using alcohol for the purpose of losing control. One female student said, “Using alcohol means losing your inhibitions.” Thus, a major benefit stemming from the use of alcohol rests in its ability to absolve behavior considered in some way nonconforming, offensive, immoral or otherwise deviant. And, as mentioned before, many of these deviant actions centered on gender norm violations. Women in this study reported using alcohol to behave in socially unacceptable ways, which included masculine behaviors. For example, the issue of women being assertive, making sexual advancements, or otherwise being forward when drinking was frequently raised by male and female respondents alike. While drinking, especially in their pursuit of romantic or sexual contacts, women (according to self-reports of their own behavior and male and female respondent observations of other women) became more aggressive. Women interviewed were more likely to discuss “trying to get what they wanted” while under the influence of alcohol.

Men and women reported that assertiveness among women was possible because alcohol was involved. The alcohol excuse exempted these women from acquiring one of the many labels reserved for women who exert desire, power, and/or control. Descriptions of sober women exhibiting and pursuing desired outcomes included “slut,” “bitch,” “whore,” “tramp,” and “hoochie.” Interestingly, in doing these alternative gender expressions, women reported feeling as if their appeal and self-esteem were enhanced during and after this proactive stance. This result corroborates

findings by Sheehan & Ridge (2001), which suggests that young women find alcohol use both meaningful and positive in terms of improving self-esteem.

Taken together, these accounts resonate with the accounts literature. Excuses, a type of account, minimize or absolve responsibility when behavior is challenged. The common belief that individual-level factors (i.e., biological, psychological) explain much of human behavior, such as the presumed individual effect alcohol has on the body, is appealing as an excuse when social norms are broken. Thus, the context of alcohol use allows situational defiance of emphasized femininity without changing women's overall gender identity. Further examples of how this robust conviction works to suspend gender norms follow. The section below will elaborate on how alcohol is used to do gender differently, whether purposefully or accidentally, for heterosexual and gay men.

#### **PURPOSEFUL GENDER DIFFERENCE AND ACCIDENTAL GENDER BLUNDERS AMONG MEN IN THE SITUATED CONTEXT OF ALCOHOL USE**

Men interviewed described the social practice of gender construction in the situated context of alcohol use. In this context, the practice of gender that was not in accordance with their gender identity was purposeful for some heterosexual men, and for gay men in particular. Alcohol use served as an account to counteract the negative labeling associated with gender difference. For others, I introduce the concept of "gender blunder," which refers to accidental gender norm violations that reveal the fluidity of gender and the necessary situational characteristics that produce them. I use quotation marks because it was unclear whether or not gender deviations were always accidental. Accidentally acting "like a fag" or unknowingly being "too butch"<sup>4</sup> are terms participants used and are terms for which I interpret to be gender blunders. When a behavior that is expressive of the opposite gender is exhibited yet unintended, a gender blunder has been committed; this is often considered a shameful act in need of explanation. Alcohol use provided a socially acceptable explanation that worked to neutralize gender blunders according to actors and audiences. The following accounts illustrate what gender blunders are, how they take place in student's lived reality, and how accounts of alcohol use provide the context necessary to permit gender difference.

Sammy, an EA heterosexual, discusses the behaviors he can do while drinking that are outside the realm of his masculine identity-appropriate practices. Sammy shares his thoughts on poetry and what the writing of poetry means. In Sammy's description, writing poetry is an activity normally reserved for women, that his poetry writing was "girl" behavior.

I got really drunk and I said “give me a pad and paper” (to my friends). 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 explains he would not normally engage in such behavior unless he was drunk. Whether it was through poetry or frank discussion, male participants discussed the difficulty of expressing emotion when not relying on alcohol. These gender indiscretions were to a degree absolved via alcohol use, thus maintaining male gender identity and the overall gender order. Steve (EA, heterosexual) further illustrates this theme:

During this year, some girl denied me and I got upset. She was like (in a feminine voice) “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 all right if I wasn’t drunk.

Steve said he would have been all right if he hadn’t been drinking. To cry due to disappointment is not an appropriate male bodily display and is thus a deviant gender construction. Steve displayed feminine qualities through his bodily display of crying. Steve’s alcohol use excused his gender blunder.<sup>5</sup> Thus, situationally, Steve is able to cry, express feminine practice, and maintain his masculine identity. Below, an EA heterosexual male makes a similar statement about emotion and the context-appropriate expression of emotion:

*Alex:* 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 shoulders...we don’t have to act tough.

Because of the cultural expectation for disinhibition to take place after alcohol use, respondents’ expected accidental gender violations or gender blunders to be more likely. Todd, a heterosexual AA, expresses this theme in discussing an exchange between him and an inebriated male friend:

He was talking to me about how hard it is having guys hit on your younger sister...he said something to me and he started crying and (he said) “It is so hard and no one understands but you.” I was (thinking) how embarrassing is that? I seen him cry! (Men) don’t

cry. If you cry, that is something you keep to yourself. But he was drunk, so I can understand.

To cry is to be soft. To be soft is not masculine, it is feminine, and feminine traits among men are not acceptable unless alcohol is involved. Through alcohol, men were able to express their emotions, which would otherwise be bottled up and difficult to share given existing gender norms. The situation structured the action accordingly. Alcohol allows men to vent, and, in some cases, cry. When discussing the heavy use of alcohol in particular, by implication, respondents assume that the ability to control behavior is all but lost. Participants reify the disinhibition qualities assumed to be psychopharmacologically associated with alcohol. An EA heterosexual male, for example, stated, "When you are drinking, you really don't have any responsibility. Your only responsibility is to have fun." However, when control is lost, appropriate gender performance can become a precarious task. Because respondents assumed that self-control becomes more difficult, the act of doing gender becomes less precise, and mistakes become more probable. For those who fear straying too far from socially prescribed gender norms, acting too feminine or too masculine can be a mistake or blunder. For example, an EA heterosexual male said, "Alcohol gives you like a get out of jail free card. You can dance and sing and fuck up and it won't matter because you are drunk. That is what I do."

Men discussed how the use of alcohol created a context where variations of masculinity that include behaviors considered nonmasculine, effeminate, or homosexual in nature were performed. On the extreme end, purposefully doing gender differently took the form of homosexual contact for men who identified as heterosexual. How this takes place behaviorally largely stems from the meanings and cultural significance of alcohol use and its power to excuse. Consider the following quotes that refer to homosexual activity:

*Sam (AA, heterosexual):* 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 (EA, heterosexual):* 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."

Both Sam and Adam discuss the fluidity of sexuality when alcohol is involved. Drunkenness permits inappropriate gender practices without jeopardizing one's gender identity. Participants in the study raised the condition of "beer goggles" induced by alcohol, which blurred the distinction between appropriate sex partners and inappropriate sex partners. The blurring effect caused by "beer goggles" to an extent was supposed to excuse normative infractions involving sexual behavior. Below, James (EA and homosexual), shares a specific alcohol-related sexual experience with men understood to be heterosexual.

*James:* When I was like 18 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 guy 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.

The experience described above reveals how situated behavior occurs. Situationally, these men were not acting like males, yet their overall identity as men remained intact because of the alcohol excuse. Below, David recounts high school experiences with homosexuality among individuals identified as heterosexual.

*David (EA, heterosexual):* I eventually had sex with two of my high school friends when they were drunk. It was a one or two time experience for them and the first for me. One in the mall at Hooters... (we were) just drinking...another at a gay bar...he felt safe (at a gay bar) from not being seen. Another straight guy was at a major work function. After the weekend convention, we had a big party. In the hotel bar, I remember being with some higher-up person at the table and someone else. But I remember we played foosy or something and he got a room at the hotel. We went and we had sex in his room. I later found out from a friend at the call center where I worked that he was married and his wife was

pregnant. Obviously he was very drunk and didn't know we were being obvious. I was fired three weeks later<sup>6</sup>.

We see from the experience described above how specific circumstances allow for the construction of gender via practices understood to be feminine or masculine. Victor, an EA heterosexual, shares a similar alcohol related sexual encounter. In this case, instead of the partner being male, Victor's partner was not a desirable or normative sexual partner due to her appearance. Victor states:

*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 uses the alcohol excuse to distance himself from sexual behavior with women deemed inappropriate. Masculine men practice sexual acts with appropriate targets, which do not include other men or undesirable women. Much like the accounts from homosexual respondents discussed above, alcohol was used as an excuse.

Alcohol is used as an excuse only for those who need an excuse. It is used as an excuse for those who resist nonconformity, for those who fear marginalization, or for those who have taken expected gendered performance to an extreme (e.g., date rape). Young gay men who are first experiencing the difficult process of coming out reported using alcohol to nullify the stigma of being different. Relying upon alcohol as a way to excuse deviant sexual activity was a common theme expressed by young gay male participants struggling to come out. Take the following account for example. Hector, an EA homosexual, talks about the drinking scene, which sounds similar to the drinking scenes of heterosexual EA men. The underlying reasons for drinking, however, are different. Hector states:

*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.

Internalized homophobia and the resulting self-loathing stemming from conflict between desire and cultural sexual standards make alcohol a powerful device to experiment with gender practices. Hector suggests that he could not enter the gay bar sober during his initial coming out period; Hector needed to be drunk. Situated intoxication thus permitted Hector to engage in constructing nonhegemonic masculinities. Gender difference here means choosing to be a patron at a local gay bar as a way to pursue his sexual interests. As Hector's gay identity progressed, the role of alcohol was less likely to be used as a way to do gender differently, but rather as a way to socialize with his peers.

Caceres and Cortinas (1996) report that the gay bar provides a social setting where gender and sexuality, as social categories, is reconstructed via alcohol use. That is to say, alcohol use was a catalyst of sorts used to disrupt the normative gender and sexual social order within a specific social space—the gay bar. Thus, for individuals who identify as gay, and are comfortable doing so, gender blunder is not necessarily an appropriate description. Gay participants who had come to embrace their sexuality reported celebrating the opportunity to break free from gender norms in settings afforded by spaces such as gay bars. For these gay men and women, the ritual use of alcohol is not necessarily about celebrating the 21<sup>st</sup> birthday or the completion of a difficult week of exams. Instead, alcohol use among gay women and men is centered on the opportunity to be hyper-masculine, hyper-feminine, or whatever form of gender construction is needed, as dictated by the intersection between the immediate circumstance, situated context, and individual goals of the person in question. Alcohol can still be blamed for deviant behavior should the person in question be eventually asked to explain his or her actions to friends and or peers (i.e., informal agents of social control). “The alcohol made me do it” excuse thus appears to be acceptable as illustrated by the accounts documented here and the research literature in general (Caceres & Cortinas, 1996).

## CONCLUSION

Using accounts theory as a heuristic tool, this data-driven piece supports SAT. Participants report the use of alcohol situated men and women to engage in gender difference. Through deviant gender constructions situated in the context of alcohol use, the fluidity of gender is exposed, while the alcohol excuse at the same time maintains gender identity. Because there is no evidence to suggest alcohol in and of itself alters behaviors considered to be naturally male or female, I conclude that because gender is a social construct, and the use of alcohol has cultural and social meaning, gender displays and practices become more varied in alcohol use contexts. Participants in the study were inclined to attribute the psychopharmacological properties of alcohol to explain the expression of traditional or nontraditional

gendered behaviors. This serves to reproduce and reinforce the status quo of gendered structure. Public alcohol use facilitated the construction of gender regardless of whether gender displays coincided with assigned gender. What was important in gender practices and displays was the situated context in which participants found themselves. The use of alcohol aids not only in the doing of masculinity,<sup>7</sup> but also excuses gender performances not in accordance with proscribed gender practices for both men and women.

This research is important because it (a) implicates alcohol as a tool used in the reproduction of gender, (b) adds to our knowledge on the fluidity and social construction of gender, (c) illuminates how gender is used as a tool for achieving a desired goal (i.e., situated social action), and (d) exemplifies how both men and women use alcohol-related excuses to meet normative expectations (i.e., reproducing social structure). Finally, this analysis contributes to the accounts literature by virtue of its focus on excuses for constructing gender difference. It is important, however, to recognize the limitations of this study. This data collection procedure, which produced the subsample of participants recruited by the Dean of Student's Office, may have biased the sample. It is important to note that the accounts of drinking provided by these participants did not differ from the rest of the sample (e.g., differences in underage drinking or alcohol-related violence). Next, these data were reliant upon participants' memories of alcohol use. It is possible that participants did not accurately report events. However, the manner in which participants constructed their drinking stories is telling of gender dynamics in general and is telling of the meaning of alcohol in particular (see Orbuch, 1997, for a discussion on the importance of accounts in deriving meaning from social behavior). Finally, because these data were collected between 1997 and 2001, drinking cultures may have shifted since this study was conducted (see Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2003). It is important, however, to recognize that the purpose of this study was not to purport a fixed and unchanging gendered reaction to alcohol, but to provide a snapshot of the significance of gender in drinking cultures and to illustrate the fluidity of gender in situated contexts. With these limitations in mind, I now review the findings and discuss their implications.

Women commonly report using alcohol purposefully as an excuse to engage in behaviors not associated with their prescribed and traditional gender role. Women violated the expected role of passivity, especially when actively pursuing sexual or romantic partners. Public alcohol use absolved women from the consequences of norm violation. Women stated that feelings of low self-worth and low self-confidence were boosted in the context of alcohol use. Women felt good about themselves when engaging in more active instead of passive behaviors. Gay men used alcohol to purposefully celebrate difference. For gay participants, alcohol was used to

escape from a perceived heterosexist society and from confining gender norms that did not fit their marginalized ways of doing gender. Alcohol was also used as a means to escape the pain associated with deviant status. Alcohol use provided the excuse to be different and facilitated the ability to be different in the accepting space of the gay bar. The gay bar is a social space, centered on alcohol, where gender-based norms can be left at the doorstep and the construction of gender can take on alternative forms. Bars are thus locations where the boundaries of gender are redrawn, recreated, and reinvented because of the time-out period afforded by alcohol use. Participants also provided evidence of how men use alcohol to construct gender in ways not afforded by their gender identity. These constructions involve emotional expression, poetry writing, dancing, and sexual encounters with inappropriate partners. Importantly, alcohol use simultaneously allowed for gender difference and the structure of gender to remain in place (Lucal, 1999) through its power to excuse gender norm violations.

While participants accepted the excuse of drunkenness for gender blunders, they simultaneously believed that a drinking person has control of the body and mind. This discrepancy reveals that the mysterious psychopharmacological nature of alcohol is invoked only when convenient. For participants, the notion that gender is an active accomplishment is a foreign concept. Many believe the expression of gender is entirely a natural extension of human behavior uninfluenced by social structure, social control, or social norms. These accounts reveal that self-control is not entirely lost when heavy drinking occurs. Thus gender, in the face of heavy alcohol use, is being actively and purposefully constructed. What is more, while all participants agree that alcohol should never be accepted as an excuse for improper behavior in general, this collective stance quickly disappears as evidenced by their frequent use of alcohol-related excuses in individual interaction, both as recipient and invokers of alcohol-related excuses.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Research of this kind has not examined the social setting of the college campus. Nor has prior research explored how individuals who self-describe as heterosexual use alcohol to blur the constructed dichotomous identities of straight, gay, masculine, or feminine. In other words, prior research has not explored situated actions that reproduce gendered social structure.
- <sup>2</sup> College students happen to be an ideal group to study gendered social structure and the role of alcohol use. First, colleges and universities are replete with examples of gender segregation, emphasized femininity, and hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2002; Bemiller 2005) despite the reputation of colleges and universities have for pursuing gender equality and diversity (Davies &

Guppy, 1997). Pressures to conform to norms while in college are formidable. Students learn to actively avoid behaviors understood to be deviant in order to avoid marginalization. Researchers have found traditional forms of deviance (i.e., theft, vandalism, and violence) are excused away via alcohol use (Corbin, Bernat, Calhoun, McNair, & Seals, 2001; Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996). Secondly, college and university students are routinely found to be among the heaviest of drinkers relative to other social groups according to nationally representative surveys (Gfroerer, Greenblatt, & Wright, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that drinking accounts provided by this group of participants did not differ from those who were not drawn from the Dean of Students Office. The described experiences of both groups could have easily placed any of these participants into the university's judiciary system. Infractions against university policy included underage drinking and destruction of university property.

<sup>4</sup> The term butch refers in a rough sense to hyper-masculinity; to exhibit characteristics traditionally thought of as masculine.

<sup>5</sup> The specific context largely determines the extent to which alcohol is able to facilitate alternative gender performances.

<sup>6</sup> This account and the others from lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants interviewed were more sexually explicit compared to the accounts told by their heterosexual counterparts. I do not know why this was the case. Perhaps the LGB participants interviewed were more open about sexuality in general. Nevertheless, the accounts expressed here reflect differences in the sharing of sexual details by sexuality.

<sup>7</sup> The doing of alcohol and the doing of masculinity is discussed elsewhere (Peralta, 2002). Essentially, previous research suggests that particularly heavy and frequent drinking and the particular types of alcohol used are fraught with masculine symbolism. Heavy alcohol use among men in masculine oriented occupations and settings: police, college fraternities, and military (Obst, Davey, & Sheehan, 2001; Wechsler & Kuo, 2003; Bray, Fairbank & Marsden, 1999) has been found to be common.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Dr. Andre Christie-Mizell, Dr. James Messerschmidt, Dr. Matt Lee, and Jodi Ross for their helpful suggestions on previous versions of this paper. I would also like to thank Drs. Cynthia Robbins, Ronet Bachman, J. Michael Cruz, and Tricia Wachtendorf for their contributions. I thank Lori Tuttle and John Durkin III for editing assistance. I also thank the editor and anonymous reviewers at the *Journal of Drug Issues* for their helpful comments and suggestions on previous drafts. Finally, I thank the University of Delaware Department of Sociology, the

Minority Fellowship Program of the American Sociological Association for funding support, and the students who shared their stories.

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