

ENTRY NAME:

Prepartying/Pregaming

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OVERVIEW:

Prepartying, also commonly referred to as pregaming, involves the consumption of alcohol prior to attending an event or activity (e.g., party, bar, concert) at which more alcohol may be consumed. Prepartying has only recently been identified and introduced into empirical literature and initial reports indicate that it is an extremely popular method of alcohol consumption among late adolescents, particularly those attending college, regardless of legal drinking age status. Common motivations for prepartying include saving money, easier bonding and relational interaction due to the ‘social lubricant’ effects, obtaining a ‘buzz’ if underage and not being able to purchase alcohol later, and maintaining status for what is perceived to be a normative behavior among one’s peers. However, research indicates that a substantial amount of risk is associated with prepartying. Due to the quick-paced drinking style associated with it, prepartying has been found to significantly increase risk for heavy drinking and a wide range of negative alcohol-related consequences. Current research trends regarding the high-risk nature of prepartying constitute a call to action for its inclusion in targeted prevention and intervention initiatives with young people.

ENTRY ESSAY:

Whether due to alcohol naivety, underage drinking, the desire to obtain a “buzz” before socializing with friends, or other factors, alcohol use among young people often takes place away from authority and/or legal drinking environments, which may lend itself to risky drinking practices. Recently, attention has been drawn to a high-risk activity widely popular among adolescents, particularly those attending college. Also referred to as “pre-gaming,” “pre-loading,” “front-loading,” “pre-drinking,” or “pre-funking” depending on the region or local group vernacular, *prepartying involves “the consumption of alcohol prior to attending an event or activity (e.g., party, bar, concert) at which more alcohol may be consumed” (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007, p. 238)*. Prepartying typically entails fast-paced drinking within brief periods of time, as an inherent purpose is to create a “buzz” or level of inebriation that will endure through the event or until more alcohol can be obtained. Although the genesis of prepartying is unknown, it may have its origin in tailgating behavior. During tailgating, professional or college sports fans consume alcoholic beverages in parking lots prior to entering a stadium or arena to watch a sporting event. From empirical research, exploratory reports, and anecdotal evidence, it appears that this behavior has broadened beyond drinking before sporting events to also include drinking before parties, bars, clubs, concerts, movies, and dates. It can be performed alone or with friends while conversing, watching television, listening to music, showering and preparing to go out, and by playing drinking games. Prepartying can be executed in a variety of environments such as residence hall rooms, friends’ or parents’ houses, cars (as passengers or drivers), parking lots, and while finishing up an evening work shift.

Adolescents may engage in prepartying due to a confluence of potential risk factors associated with the developmental period. These include the decreased salience of parents and

increased salience of peers, greater exposure to the modeling of peer behavior, transition to adulthood, orientation toward autonomy and nonconventional behaviors, and emphasis on drinking as a social lubricant associated with fun (Palmqvist, Martikainen, & von Wright, 2003; Palmqvist & Santavirta, 2006). Moreover, particularly in high school, students are under the legal drinking age and prepartying offers an environmental context in which adolescents can drink before going to a sporting event, dance, or other activity at which there will be adult supervision and it would be difficult or impossible to get access to alcohol. Currently, the majority of research exploring the various facets of prepartying has primarily focused on college students. However, given the high rates of prevalence in college studies, recent research has also begun to explore the impact of initiating and engaging in this high-risk drinking context while in high school on both high school drinking and subsequent college drinking outcomes (Kenney, Hummer, & LaBrie, 2010). This is an important and necessary progression, as prepartying represents a heavy drinking context with potential to disrupt important developmental transitions and assimilation into new academic and social environments. Adolescents, particularly those transitioning into college environments, are presented with a range of academic, social, and developmental challenges that must be navigated concomitantly with the sudden increase of autonomy. Not surprisingly, mastery of these endeavors is vital to developmental progression, as adaptive habits formed during the transitional period may carry long-term implications. Thus, identifying and understanding risky drinking behaviors, such as prepartying, continues to be a priority for researchers and practitioners seeking to design effective alcohol prevention and intervention programs aimed at reducing risk and increasing health and wellness among high school and college-aged students.

PREVALENCE AND CONSUMPTION RATES

To date, the majority of studies on prepartying have focused on prevalence rates in collegiate samples. However, in a recent study of 477 first-year college students assessed four weeks after matriculation, 45% of participants reported engaging in prepartying at least once during the last months of high school (Kenney et al., 2010). On average, those who prepartied during high school reported prepartying 4.05 days per month, consuming 3.22 alcoholic beverages while prepartying and 5.61 total beverages per prepartying drinking day (including during and after prepartying), and prepartying in 36% of drinking occasions. Moreover, prepartying during high school emerged as an indicator of heavier drinking; prepartiers reported 3.6 times greater weekly drinking than non-prepartiers (non-drinkers excluded from analyses) and 61% of prepartiers (as compared to 29% of non-prepartiers) engaged in heavy episodic drinking during typical drinking occasions. Thus, prepartying in later adolescence appears to be a popular and potentially hazardous drinking context.

The study also extended research on the high-risk drinking nature of prepartying by examining how involvement in this activity during high school contributed to risky drinking and consequences during the transition into college. Prepartying in high school was associated with significantly heavier consumption and more negative alcohol-related consequences among first-year students during the first month of college. Importantly, the analyses predicting collegiate drinking controlled for overall high school drinking and the analyses for collegiate consequences controlled for both overall high school and college drinking. Controlling for these strong established predictors of college risk helps to demonstrate the unique influence of prepartying during high school. It appears that new collegiate environments lacking parental supervision and previous support systems may lead to greater risk and consequences for students with previous

prepartying experience. This was the first article to document prepartying while in high school as well as examine how engaging in prepartying during high school may increase high school risk as well as prospective college risk.

A recent study of 1327 student drinkers from nine US colleges found that 98% reported prepartying at least once in the month prior to assessment (Zamboanga, Schwartz, Ham, Borsari, & Van Tyne, 2010). While this prevalence rate is unusually high and may be an artifact of the phrasing of the question, other empirical studies using college samples have yielded prevalence rates of 64% (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2008), 75% (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007), and 74% (Pedersen, LaBrie, & Kilmer, 2009) for the past month and 64% for the past two weeks (DeJong & DeRicco, 2007). Among a sample of first-year college students, prepartying was involved in approximately 45% of all past month drinking events (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007). In an exploratory field study involving a random assessment of alcohol behaviors in a naturalistic setting of a downtown bar scene, 69% of participants from a local university reported they had prepartied before going downtown to drink (Glindemann, Ehrhart, Maynard, & Geller, 2006). Even among young adults and older adolescents in North West England, where the legal drinking age is 18, 55% of males and 60% of females in a study reported prepartying prior to going to a pub, bar or nightclub and prepartiers were significantly more likely than non-prepartiers to report extremely high levels of consumption (Hughes, Anderson, Morleo, & Bellis, 2007). Finally, in a study of American college students at a private liberal arts university in the Northeast who had been referred for mandatory intervention following an alcohol-related violation, those who had been prepartying the night of their violation (31%) reported significantly higher consumption levels and Blood Alcohol Levels (BALs) than did non-prepartiers.

In three separate college studies, researchers estimated that participants reached blood alcohol levels near or above the legal intoxication limit (0.08) during the prepartying drinking events (LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008; Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007; Pedersen et al., 2009). For the majority of participants, this blood alcohol level was achieved prior to going out and consuming even more alcohol. In event-level studies, 80% of preparty drinking events involved further drinking (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007), and when including drinks consumed during and after prepartying, students reached total blood alcohol levels of approximately 0.15 during prepartying days (LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008). This elevated level of intoxication is greatly risk-enhancing, significantly impairing motor control, vision, and decision-making. It is also important to mention that men and women have been found to reach similar prepartying estimated BALs despite men reporting drinking more drinks during prepartying (e.g. LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2009). Yet more women report consuming shots of liquor and mixed drinks while men report drinking beer during prepartying (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007). Thus, the varying levels of ethyl alcohol contained in males' and females' drink of choice and the differential physiological impact alcohol has on the different sexes, seems to account for the similar levels of intoxication that are reached (Freeza et al., 1990; Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2002).

REASONS FOR PREPARTYING

While prepartying may have its origin in tailgating behavior it may have also emerged from underage drinkers not having access to alcohol once they go out for the evening. Underage college students in the U.S. may consume alcohol prior to attending a club that requires students be 18 years of age to enter, but 21 or older to consume alcohol. In addition, concert venues,

sporting arenas and stadiums, or school sponsored events require that students be of legal drinking age in order to consume alcoholic beverages. Similarly, for high school-aged students, time spent without parental supervision may be limited and for these underage students seeking to be under the influence while out at a planned destination, the only option may be to drink immediately beforehand.

Yet while prepartying certainly seems to be popular among underage drinkers seeking intoxication whether it be before a school-related function, party, social or sporting event, it also remains popular among students of legal drinking age. Several studies have found no differences between underage and of-age participants on the number of drinks consumed while prepartying or the frequency of prepartying in the past month (e.g. Glindemann et al., 2006; Pedersen et al., 2009). Although engagement in prepartying does not differ as a function of age, motivations may slightly differ for students of legal drinking age as compared to underage drinkers. This is yet to be determined and offers a promising area for future research.

Intoxication as a goal unto itself is a primary motive for prepartying. For example, in exploratory focus group interviews with students at 10 colleges and universities in Pennsylvania (DeJong & DeRicco, 2007; no page numbers in report) one participant reported: “No matter what the quantity, if it gets the job done, the intent is to get wasted.” Other students noted that the goal was not necessarily to get completely wasted during the preparty, but to get a head start for later drinking. One female student stated that prepartying drinks “are not something to get annihilated on, but just a base to go from when you get to a party.” In a study by Pedersen and colleagues (2009) that specifically focused on reasons for prepartying among a young college-aged population, males and females reported arriving to a social event already under the influence (i.e., “buzzed” or “drunk”), as their most highly endorsed reason for prepartying. In

this regard, prepartying may be symptomatic of a ‘new culture of intoxication’ apparent in both American and European cultures whereby a large percentage of young people drink with the goal of achieving drunkenness (Measham & Brain, 2005; Järvinen & Room, 2007; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008).

Another important motive for prepartying appears to be economic. For example, in a study of young bar-goers in Glasgow, Scotland (Forsyth, 2006), one respondent noted ‘...if you bought [and drank] something with your pals first...it saves you money’ (p. 66). Another participant in the Pennsylvania study (DeJong & DeRicco, 2007) reported that prepartying is ‘just getting drunk before you go somewhere else so you don’t have to purchase as much alcohol.’ Similarly in the same study, when asked what term students use to describe prepartying, one male student replied, “I call it saving money.” And in the study by Pedersen and colleagues (2009), the third most highly endorsed reason for prepartying among both males and females was to save money.

Prepartying also offers important social functions, such as a ‘social lubricant’ or to enhance bonding. It allows young people to socialize with their friends before going out and further helps them to ‘ease the discomfort or awkwardness they associate with meeting new people at the intended destination’ (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007, p. 243). In the Pennsylvania study (DeJong & DeRicco, 2007) young people reported engaging in prepartying to alleviate anxiety and stress associated with socializing with other people. Similarly, participants in the Glasgow study described getting drunk before going to a nightclub to increase their confidence and reduce self-consciousness (Forsyth, 2006). And in the study by Pedersen and colleagues (2009), the second most highly endorsed reason for prepartying among both males and females was to make the night more interesting. However, in this study, males had significantly higher ratings for

reasons related to meeting members of the opposite sex, facilitating sexual opportunities, enjoying concerts and sporting events more, and conforming to social pressure. Drawing on 271 ethnographic accounts of nightlife consumption (restaurants, bars, dance clubs, etc.) as reported by male college students, Grazian (2007) found that young heterosexual college men used prepartying to engage in a collective ritual of confidence building to prepare themselves for subsequent interactions with the opposite sex. Thus while men and women appear to have similar reasons for prepartying in general, more men may preparty as a means to increase social and sexual facilitation with opposite sex peers. Perhaps men preparty as a way to ease the potential awkwardness or nervousness accompanying new social situations, especially with female students. Again, in the Pennsylvania study (DeJong & DeRicco, 2007), one male student noted, "If you don't know where you are going, you go heavier on the pre-game, or if you don't know anybody there." Another said, "There might be a girl you want to talk to, and you might talk to her then, rather than if you were sober and you feel like an idiot."

Finally, reasons for prepartying may also rely on a more passive social influence process in which young people may act in accordance with what they believe constitutes 'typical' behavior by one's peers. A study by Pedersen & LaBrie (2008) examined the extent that college students overestimate prepartying behavior among their peers and explored how these perceptions relate to drinking behavior. The authors found that students overestimated the frequency of prepartying among all students, male students only, and female students only, at their university. Male and female participants were similar in nearly all of their perceptions of behavior. In addition, a relationship emerged between perceived behavior and actual behavior. Overestimations of prepartying appeared to relate to individual prepartying behavior. Perhaps the perception that other students will already be drunk once arriving at the destination motivates

students to drink beforehand themselves, avoiding being “the only one” at the party, bar, or event without a good buzz. Indeed, one female student in the Pennsylvania study (DeJong & DeRicco, 2007) corroborated this idea: “You don’t want to show up and be the only one completely in their right mind, because everyone else is either drunk or getting there, and you will feel awkward or uncomfortable.” As noted earlier, men may also desire to arrive at similar intoxication levels as their male peers, perhaps to demonstrate their drinking ability or to loosen up to meet members of the opposite sex. For women, the overestimation of both male and female norms may have a similar interpretation, because subjective reports suggest that women may desire to be accepted by and held in high regard by male drinking partners and that women who can drink amounts of alcohol comparable to men receive more sexual attention from male peers (Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, & D’Arcy, 2005). Believing that intoxicated female peers will have an advantage over them in impressing or meeting men may influence prepartying consumption levels. Women also appear to be influenced by opposite-sex norms, suggesting that their anticipation that men may arrive at the party or event intoxicated may influence their prepartying consumption levels.

CONSEQUENCES

The rapid intoxication and high BALs associated with prepartying makes self-regulation appreciably more difficult and negative consequences more likely. Prepartying has been found to predict numerous consequences among college students such as academic neglect, hangovers, blacking out, passing out, fighting, and alcohol dependence (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007, Pedersen et al., 2009). In an event-level study comparing a prepartying drinking day to a non-prepartying drinking day, prepartying was associated with greater alcohol-related consequences for both men

and women (LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008). These findings are not surprising considering that students drinking multiple alcoholic beverages in a short period of time may not experience the full effects of the ingested alcohol until they have arrived at their destination. For some, high intoxication levels can ruin a planned evening; either by not ever making it to the event (e.g., passing out before leaving the preparty location) or by showing up too drunk to meet one's intended goals for the evening (e.g., meet new people; spend time with friends or a potential relationship partner). On the extreme end, intoxicated students lost in the crowd at a heavily attended event may not be able to receive the attention they may need from friends or medical personnel if experiencing alcohol poisoning, vomiting, dehydration, or passing out. Related to this idea, research suggests that a student's perception of risk decreases as BAL increases (Fromme, Katz, & D'Amico, 1997), thus, students may not follow the same cues to stop drinking that they normally follow on non-prepartying drinking days. For example, many students continue to drink after prepartying (LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008; Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007), and not perceiving continued drinking to be a risk may lead some students to experience high BALs post-prepartying. Therefore, the risk of experiencing negative consequences is even greater. As one student noted, "There's a point where you can get kind of confused about how many drinks you had. Usually you talk about how many drinks you had at that one place, not before" (DeJong & DeRicco, 2007). Another student in the study stated, "You may drink more than you expected and then still feel pressured to drink where you're going [later], especially if they're playing drinking games."

PREVENTION AND HARM REDUCTION

The identification of prepartying as a high-risk behavior among young people warrants attention from high school and college personnel, researchers and practitioners, as well as parents. First, that the majority of high school prepartiers were found to engage in heavy episodic drinking while consuming alcohol (Kenney et al., 2010) is particularly disconcerting because this drinking behavior quite substantially enhances drinking-related risk and may lead to hazardous drinking trajectories. Although the high prevalence rates are alarming, they are also somewhat not surprising given that alcohol typically is not readily available among high school students who may rely on prepartying before attending social functions, such as high school dances or athletic games. Thus, educational initiatives on the risks associated with prepartying should target students early in high school or junior high school before risky patterns may be established. By targeting the prepartying context during this developmental window, participation may be minimized as might the overall amount of high school drinking, both of which have been found to contribute to prospective alcohol risk in college. Further, incorporating parents and teachers into comprehensive educational campaigns may help raise awareness within schools and families concerning the risk associated with prepartying.

Findings from the current research literature also highlight important predictor and contextual variables that can be incorporated into targeted intervention and prevention efforts at the college level. It is suggested that college student personnel, including both administrators and researchers, create novel ways to address this popular and risky behavior. For example, first-year college orientations, many of which already include components addressing high-risk activities, such as drinking, drug use, and promiscuous sexual behavior, may need to specifically address prepartying both in order to deter students from engaging in this type of drinking and to teach students harm reduction skills. In addition, non-judgmental and non-coercive interventions

taking place during the first weeks of college could help experienced prepartiers better understand the dangers associated with these drinking activities and how they may impair overall collegiate success. There is support for brief motivational-enhancement interventions to reduce risky alcohol use among students (e.g. Baer, Kivlahan, Blume, McKnight, & Marlatt, 2001; Marlatt et al., 1998). These typically one- or two-session interventions involve alcohol skills training in conjunction with motivational techniques to encourage students to think about their drinking habits. Interventions that fail to mention or target prepartying may miss an important component to college drinking. Furthermore, negative consequences from drinking have traditionally been linked to dosages commonly referred to as ‘acute excessive alcohol consumption,’ ‘fast-paced drinking,’ ‘high blood alcohol levels,’ or ‘heavy episodic drinking’. Such descriptions may not resonate with students when promoting prevention or intervention messages. Prepartying, however, is identifiable as a behavior well established in collegiate nomenclature and that can be quantifiably researched. As a result, prepartying may hold more potential as a target for efficacious experimental manipulation than other, more abstract, concepts of “heavy drinking.”

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH ON PREPARTYING AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To date, the strong majority of empirical research on prepartying has focused on cross-sectional data among college student samples. More longitudinal research that systematically collects data from cohorts of students through high school and into college is needed to more clearly elucidate the contexts in which risky drinking behaviors occur and help to increase our understanding of the developmental trajectories and social contexts of prepartying behavior.

Further assessing students' motivations for prepartying and examining the peer cultures in which they are embedded may assist in better understanding students' predispositions toward unsafe drinking behaviors. Qualitative data assessments may illuminate the extent to which socially learned peer group behavior or sensation-seeking personality styles, for instance, contribute to engagement in prepartying and other high-risk drinking contexts. Unique drinking motivations may be indicative of distinctive mindsets, and hence risk, toward drinking. Future research may also benefit from examining longitudinally how college students' drinking patterns with respect to prepartying change throughout college to determine if alcohol misuse and related problems witnessed in first-year college students are transitional or if they are indicative of hazardous trajectories. The role of prepartying in establishing trajectories that may lead to alcohol dependence has yet to be explored and would be of significant interest. Finally, many of the reported studies herein are limited by restricted samples of convenience. Large multiple-site representative samples that are geographically and ethnically diverse are warranted to better understand how prepartying and subsequent drinking and consequences may differ by sex, race, and group-affiliation.

CONCLUSION

Prepartying is a distinct phenomenon in today's adolescent drinking culture. Given its relation to increased consumption levels, elevated BALs, and prognostic influence on negative alcohol-related consequences, prepartying is also an especially risky drinking behavior. Young people view this context as a way to circumnavigate some of the perceived challenges associated with alcohol use and related drinking environments, whether economic, legal, or interpersonal in nature. Heavy drinking practices have the potential to be particularly disruptive in this

developmental window, both physiologically and psychosocially. Given the generally positive regard for prepartying held by young people and its potential for serious harm, further research and innovative strategies are needed to better understand the specific nuances of this high-risk behavior in order to reduce its popularity and sway among the younger population.

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