

DRINKING AMONG FRIENDS: SYSTEMS OF TERRITORIALITY AND RECIPROCITY ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

When I began conducting my research, I wanted to observe the exchange of alcohol between bartender and drinker in different contexts. It is obvious that some sort of ranking system is informally set to determine who should be served next; however, it is unclear how the system is structured and how the rankings are determined. More specifically, I wanted to see if there was a difference in the way these exchanges occurred at a large, all-campus party setting versus a small, private establishment, such as a local bar. It was my initial belief that there must be a difference because of the presence of money at one location and the absence of it at the other. After the three months of participant observation and interviews, I can establish that there is a definite difference between the two locations based on economic factors, but the real complexities of the exchanges are firmly rooted in the differences in community make-up and the interplay of territoriality and group-centered systems of reciprocity.

In American college communities, alcoholic beverages provide students with ways to reinforce and create bonds with other students in a system of generalized reciprocity, where the exact value of the items being exchanged, mainly drinks and alcohol, is not recorded or noted but there is an expectation that their value will balance out over time. Bruce M. Knauft (1999), in his work in Melanesia found that, "Melanesian food gifts--including the type, quality, and quantity of food--symbolize in myriad ways the social relationship between the giver and the receiver. Food-giving in Melanesia has often been subject to elaborate culturally specific conventions concerning who may share food with whom, what kinds of foods may be given, and under what conditions certain foods may or may not be eaten" (47). Drinks, in the context of college culture, can be seen as an analog to food gifts in Melanesian cultures. This custom is further explained by Ivan Karp (1980), in his study of the Iteso. He discusses a phenomenon he terms "essential sociability," whereby an individual who participates in the sharing of a pot of beer demonstrates their willingness to participate in the larger system of reciprocal exchange and their belief in the importance of being a member of the community and sharing in the responsibilities of group membership.

In addition to these extensive networks of reciprocal exchange, there is a system of territoriality that delineates ownership of space. According to Spradley and Mann (1975), "Territoriality in humans refers to the means by which space is defined, allocated, and maintained; it is a cultural phenomenon...According to different criteria, people everywhere divide, allocate, stake claims on, and attach meaning to space in way that reflect their cultural knowledge of the world" (101). In the context of college drinking environments, ownership of space is established through a variety of behaviors ranging from gatekeeping to the moving of furniture to flamboyant shows of authority.

LOCATIONS

The school in this study is a small, liberal arts college situated on top of a hill in the middle of Ohio. There are around 1,600 students, 60% female, 40% male, and the majority of them are Caucasian. They come from all over the United States and, mainly, from upper-middle class families.

The first location that I observed was, Radcliffe Hall, a dormitory at the south end of the college's campus and the all-campus party venue of choice as it has many rooms that can accommodate dance floors and bar areas while still having spaces where people can hang out.¹ The east and west entrances lead one down a set of stone stairs and into the basement area where all the parties take place. The basement consists of many small rooms and lounges connected by a long transverse hallway. Upon entering the basement, one is immediately confronted with rainforest-like humidity, the smell of sweaty bodies, the lack of light, and floors

¹ All names of people and places have been changed to preserve anonymity.

that are sticky with unknown substances. There are people everywhere, maybe too many. Two of the rooms off the main hallway contain small bars, basically just L-shaped counters with kegs of beer behind it. The number of bars open on a given night depends on the number of parties being thrown and the number of organizations hosting.

The second location is one of the two bars in the little Midwestern town of which the college is a part. It is a small, one-level building off the main street of the town. The green awning out front sports the name "The Brooklyn Street Grill", a name not frequently used by its student customers, who ceremoniously dubbed the establishment "The Den". Apparently, this title references the bar that once occupied the white, cinder-blocked premises but has since moved into the larger town about a ten minute drive down the road. Outside the door to the bar is a small patio with plastic chairs and tables, a place staked out by smokers, who huddle together in small groups both to keep warm during the chilly, spring nights and to socialize over a cigarette or two. Inside the building, there is a larger open room to the right, which contains the bar, booths, tables and chairs, and a large sound-system, which blares a bizarre compilation of current hip-hop dance music, favorite songs from the late nineties and early two thousands, and the occasional song from the sixties and seventies, with which everyone in the place sings along. There is another room off of this one that houses a pool table, a few more tables and chairs, and better lighting. The bar, itself, long and L-shaped, takes up the length of one wall and occupies the attention of the majority of the Den's patrons. Some sit on the bar stools having conversations with each other and the friends standing next to them.

Finally, it is important to note that because Radcliffe is a college dormitory all the partygoers must be students of the college and can be any age from seventeen to mid-twenties; thus, there is a distinct change of community between the Den and Radcliffe. The pool of students who can go to the Den is considerably smaller than that of Radcliffe parties as the Den is a private establishment that requires proof of age to enter. The students who go to the Den are either over twenty-one, so mainly seniors with some juniors, or have fake forms of identification. Although the number of juniors who join the Den's over-twenty-one community increases in the second semester, in general, the group that drinks at the Den on party nights (i.e. Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays) remains fairly consistent and their group dynamics become increasingly intertwined as the year goes on.

OWNERSHIP OF SPACE

Before an individual can even enter a Radcliffe party or the Den, he/she must pass through a check of identification. According to Spradley and Mann (1975), "Carding is a gatekeeping activity, allowing some persons to remain within the territorial limits of the bar and excluding others" (110). By monitoring and restricting access to these spaces, the owners of the space can assert their dominance and control their territory.

On the night of an all-campus party, a party that is open to all members of the college community, the doors are guarded by members of the fraternity or sorority or other campus organization throwing the event check every partygoers student identification card and mark the hands of the partygoers to indicate whether they are legally able to participate in the exchange of alcohol; "X" for no, "21" for yes. In this way, they are controlling access to the party and the free alcohol. They establish that, for the night, the basement of Radcliffe is their territory and subject to their rules.

Similarly, at the Den, just inside the doors of the establishment the hard-nosed bouncer checks the identification of those entering. Those who are not twenty-one or do not have identification that says they are twenty-one are turned away. Officially, this protects the bar from legal issues, but socially, the bouncer, as a representative of "The Brooklyn Street Grill", is controlling access the party spot and letting the patrons know who is in charge and who they will have to answer to if they do not follow the rules.

On a cold Wednesday night, I decided to venture over to the Den to check out the midweek partying crowd. Around eleven o'clock, a group of eight women enter the bar area.

Dressed in short skirts and dresses with tight embellished tanks and cropped tees, these women are either having a girls' night or on the prowl for men. They are loud and giggling. As a group, they approach the bar and call out to the bartender using his well-known nickname. Some of the other members of the group head over to one of the booths that line the walls of the establishment, their usual spot. They pull over another table and more chairs to put at the end of the booth, set down their coats and purses, and join their friends at the bar. One of the women props her elbow on his shoulder while the others gather around. They order a round of tequila shots complete with the slices of lime and shaker of salt. In shaky unison, they raise their glasses, make their signature toast, and let out a loud "Woool!" of celebration. Together, they lick the salt they had shaken onto the backs of their hands, take the shots, and shove the slices of lime in their mouths. Now, their night can officially begin. It is through these ostentatious displays that the group of women mark their territory and established their status at the Den as "regulars." The loud, over-the-top toasting and shot-taking, furthers their claim to the space by drawing the attention of the other patrons to the group and the group's familiarity with the bartender, established through the use of his nickname. They even demonstrate their command over the space, itself, by moving furniture to suit their needs.

This behavior demonstrates what Erving Goffman (1971) described when he said, "In general, the higher the rank, the greater the size of all territories of the self and the greater the control across boundaries" (40-41). While Goffman was relating this to male dominance and control of space, in the context of the Den, high status is held by "regulars" who control multiple tables and numerous bonds of reciprocity that cross group boundaries. In general, they are the most connected to the alcohol distribution pathways and have no issue acquiring drinks quickly and at the lowest cost to them.

Unlike the Den, a local establishment, which, to the students, is a neutral space to be claimed, each room in the basement of Radcliffe belongs to a different Greek organization on campus and is painted with their letters and, supposedly esoteric, symbols, so ownership is already determined before the party even begins and is not contestable. Therefore, ownership of the space in this venue is less flexible than it is at the Den as there is really nothing to claim other than status as a party host or perhaps a place for one's coat behind a raggedy couch in one of the lesser used side rooms. That being the case, "knowing someone" is less of a show of ownership and more a show of belonging or membership, demonstrating to the other partygoers one's standing with the territory-controlling organization. It also serves as a means of bypassing the beer line crowds, improving efficiency considerably.

RECIPROCITY

On my way to a Radcliffe party, I had a conversation with the two women accompanying me, Halle Maddox and Trina Simmons about their strategies for acquiring beer at these events, especially in regards to the sex of bartenders. Both women seems to agree that their strategies changed significantly depending on the bartender's sex. "If the bartender is a guy," Halle asserted, "you can get faster service if you use your boobs to catch his eye and/or maintain eye contact with him." Trina agreed by vigorously nodding her head and added half-jokingly, "And if all else fails look sad." Basically, if the bartender is a heterosexual male, heteronormative expressions femininity, such as the vulnerable "sad eyes," and overtly-sexual displays of the female body are effective tools for women looking to get a beer faster. However, when the bartender is a woman the strategy changes to "know someone." Even the men that I interviewed about this said that if the bartender is a woman, being acquainted with them is the best way of getting beer quicker. This mantra ends up being the most widely-accepted strategy for this setting regardless of sex. Thus, at a Radcliffe beer counter, reciprocity and reestablishment of friendship ties is seen between the bartenders and partygoers.

As I entered the bar area of the Radcliffe basement, I could not help but be surprised by the number of people crammed into the small space. Behind the bar are two women dressed in matching t-shirts that sport the letters of their sorority. Around the outside of the bar, men and

women are scrambling, fighting their way to the front of the mob. Arms, reaching and stretching as far as they can, over the heads of the people in front of them. Closest to the bar are the shorter women who were able to squeeze past the taller men and women. It is an absolute free-for-all, a Darwinian “struggle-fest”, that pushes individuals to look out for their own interests as opposed to those of the group. While some groups send one ambitious representative forward into the fray to procure beer for everyone. Usually, the groups disband temporarily in order to get beer for themselves and then immediately reconnoiter at a designated spot. This being the case, if an individual wants a drink, he/she must approach the bar alone.

Efficiency is a key component in a successful exchange. It becomes almost a badge of honor to return to the meeting spot the quickest, showing one's beer line navigation prowess. This non-relational exchange seems to be a reproduction of the larger capitalist system of which college is a part, where the focus is on competition, ambition, and the individual.

Because the student body is a small community with intertwining relational ties, not all the exchanges in the Radcliffe beer line are non-relational in nature. When an individual knows the bartender, he/she can go around the side of the counter to the opening and talk with their currently-bartending friend, a strategy I implemented to interview Melissa Reading at the all-campus party. Specifically, I wanted to know about the bartenders' decision-making process. Melissa's immediate response was first come, first serve. However, when I asked her if she would serve her sorority sisters and friends first, she said, “I would definitely serve [them] faster than I would serve random people.” She added that if someone she was not acquainted with had been waiting for a long time that she would serve them over her sisters or friends and that “[Her sisters and friends] understand that and would not be upset. They would do the same.” Their bond and priority is understood and the exchange is more of a social exchange than one of just beer; therefore, it does not require the same sort of immediacy as the exchanges with *rando*s, random people with no connection to oneself. In addition, it is understood that if the positions were reversed that a similar ranking system and exchange process would occur.

Ultimately, reciprocal exchange of alcohol occurs in the context of a Radcliffe party, but only along one narrow avenue. Some people in the beer line try to fabricate a reciprocal relationship with the bartender by calling out their name or nickname in an attempt to appear familiar, warranting of a higher ranking in the beer line. In the hours I spent by the bar that night, half of the people implementing this strategy were actually friends of the bartenders; however, of the other half, who really just knew one of the bartenders' names, only a small percentage of them improved their beer line status. On a larger scale, this type of exchange has the added component of the Greek system, which creates certain alliances between sororities and fraternities on campus. These connections elevate members of these organizations in the alcohol distribution hierarchy of the ally organization.

In contrast to the narrow, bar-centered avenues of exchange that occur at Radcliffe parties, the Den offers multiple arenas for reciprocity, but most notably, these exchanges occur within the friend groups that occupy the booths and tables around the bar area. These bands of friends share strategies similar to those of foraging groups, who practice generalized reciprocity as a means of evenly distributing wealth and achieving economic success and well-being for the entire group. There exists an understanding within a circle of friends that members of the group will trade off buying rounds of drinks and that, presumably, at the end of the night, everyone will have contributed a similar, if not the same, amount of money to the purchasing of alcohol. This practice of reciprocity cements the friendship bonds of those in the group through a sense of mutual obligation and economic commitment to ensuring a good evening for everyone in the group. In addition, in most foraging groups, failure to contribute to communal success leads to the ostracization of the transgressor. Similarly, among Den patrons, group members who do not buy a round when it is their turn are excluded from the future ones.

The make-up of these groups and the Den community in terms of sex adds an additional dimension to these systems of exchange. The all-female bands tend to send two or

three of their members up to the bar as a group as opposed to all-male groups, who send one man up to the bar to bring back alcohol for the group. In addition, while in most cases, the all-female group will purchase shots or mixed drinks for the whole group, if the group is too large, smaller groups will form within the larger group with members of the clusters buying drinks among themselves. In general, the all-male groups purchase pitchers of beer, which are easily distributed among the group members and are relatively inexpensive.

While the behaviors of the single-sex groups are interesting and definitely indicative of a larger, culturally-influenced pattern of gender expression, the most interesting interactions occurred in the groups of both males and females. In this context, the buying of drinks for another member of the group can either cement a bond of friendship or signal sexual interest. For Vanessa Mill, drink buying is an activity left up to the men of her group. When I asked her about her strategies for getting a drink at the bar, she promptly replied, "oh, I always make the boys buy me drinks...I've never ordered at the bar, actually." Essentially, Vanessa plays into the men's desire to fulfill the hegemonic masculine identity in order to procure drinks. She added that while flirting frequently plays a role in this behavior, it is understood that buying her the drink is merely a friendly gesture and not one that could result in a sexual encounter. Perhaps the man buying her the drink receives an increase in his masculine image, either psychologically or socially, in return for this gesture, which does not have any apparent material or physical gain attached to it. The following story presents similar exchange in which the flow of material goods seems to travel in one direction; however, the psychological and social gains involved make the exchange, as a whole, balanced:

In the main room of the Den, there is a small, waist-high wall that creates a narrow path between it and the bar. As it nears midnight, this corridor is packed with groups of people socializing and moving to the music. A tall, blonde woman walks over to the opening in the bar. Dressed in a blue, strapless minidress, hair disheveled from dancing, she attracts the attention of all the men at the bar. She casually leans her elbows on the edge of the counter, not paying any attention to the onlookers. Looking down the bar, she tries to make eye contact with one of the frantic bartenders, fiddling with the small orange debit card in her hand, which indicates her status as a customer. Some of the other women at the bar eye up the woman in the blue dress and seem to be judging her from a distance. After having seen this indirect interaction occur many times before, I concluded that these women were assessing the woman in blue as someone to compete with in the race to get drinks and to attract the attention of the men at the bar, possibly as sources of more drinks or as potential candidates for an after-hours rendezvous. Additionally, given the size of this college's student body, it is likely that the women already at the bar know the woman in the blue dress from a class or just around campus.

The woman in the blue dress does not seem to care that she is being assessed by the people around and continues to try to catch the eye of a bartender. Interestingly, she does not become pushy or aggressive as time goes by and still she is not served. One of the men at the bar must have said something to her (her name perhaps) because she turns her head towards him and temporarily stops with her quest for a drink. Their conversation is pretty casual but it is clear that they knew each other or were somehow acquainted previously, possibly from a class two semesters ago or a chance encounter at a party earlier in the week. The other women at the bar, who were clearly eavesdropping on the conversation, appear to be agitated by or at least jealous of the ongoing conversation between the man and the woman in the blue dress.

At one point, the man comments on how long it was taking for her to get a drink, clearly implying that such an attractive woman should have been served a while ago, and then he asks her what she was trying to order. She replies that she wanted a pitcher of Pabst to share with some friends. The man says that he would like to buy it for her and throws in that he would like to buy her something stronger as well, like a shot or a mixed drink. She initially declines the offer entirely, but after much insisting on the part of the man, she gives in to letting him buy the pitcher but remains adamant that she does not want him to buy her a shot. She was not looking to get too drunk that night, just have a few drinks among friends.

Getting the attention of any of the three bartenders working that night was nearly impossible but, after much ado, the woman in blue became the proud owner of a pitcher of Pabst. She thanked the man, who had picked up the tab, and walked away from the bar to a group of two men. It appears that the pitcher of beer was to be shared with these other men much to the chagrin of the man who paid for it. As she poured three glasses from the pitcher, the man from the bar walks over to her. He says something to her with a coy smile and offers her his hand, inviting her out to the dance floor. In a drunkenly clever maneuver, she extends the pitcher of beer out to him, deflecting his advances. He seems a little put out but accepts the offer and takes a swig from the side of the pitcher. After, he hands it back to her and extends his hand again in some sort of last-ditch effort. She laughs in a friendly way and feigns shyness to which in response he gives up his quest and walks towards the dance floor alone.

This whole exchange intrigued me so I asked, Vanessa, who was at the bar that night to tell me more about those people, if she could. She said that the man, who had bought the pitcher of beer was Tim Calloway, a man who she had said in a previous interview was “very generous when drunk” and had often bought her alcohol. I also discovered the name of the woman in the blue dress, Cassie Van Arnem. According to Vanessa, Cassie and Tim were old friends that had not stayed close after their freshman year. I inquired as to what the nature of their relationship was now in their senior year and Vanessa said that they are still just friends, who both just happen to be flirty. She also stated that she had recently gotten Tim to buy her a few shots at last call on Friday nights even though he knows that she is in a steady relationship. According to her, the interaction I saw was fairly common and probably did not mean much more than what it appeared to be, old friends reuniting over an exchange of alcohol. While Cassie is the only one who left the exchange with alcohol, Tim received prestige from his friend for knowing and conversing with the attractive woman in the blue dress and added to his image as a generous individual.

Tim’s generosity without expectation of material return was further corroborated by Enid Somerhalder, who happened to take Tim back to her place that same night. She recalled the time she spent with Tim at the Den and remembered that as they wove their way through the different groups of people, Tim talked to a number of other men and offered to buy them drinks. He even offered to buy another woman a drink, a gesture Enid was not pleased with. However, after about twenty minutes of this, Enid realized his drunken comportment was to become incredibly generous and social, prompting him to spend time and money on cementing social ties. This behavior has created a well-known persona for Tim that is so positive and complimentary that he seeks to reinforce it every night he visits the Den.

RECIPROCITY CRIMES

On the other end of this spectrum of reciprocity, Ivan Karp (1980) argues that, among the Iteso, refusing to or hesitating to participate in the commensal drinking of a pot of beer, shows a lack of commitment to the larger structure of reciprocity on which societal unity and stability is founded. Similarly, in the small college community, those who do not participate in the commensality of group drinking by either refusing to participate at all in the exchange or not contributing financially to it lose standing in their group. The first case usually occurs when a member of the group does not want to consume alcohol. While abstaining from alcohol is not viewed negatively among most groups, it is expected that the non-drinker at least participate in the ritualized behaviors that accompany the alcohol, such as toasts, with water or some other non-alcoholic beverage. Individuals who refuse to share in the activity are look upon as lesser members of the group and can become the subject of the group’s mistrust as their lack participation signals disinterest in group membership and has the potential to bring down the energy level of the group.

While these non-participants are seen as bothersome by the group, their presence does not elicit anger or hostility. It is the second case that carries the more serious implications. By accepting gifts, such as drinks, from the group members, an individual forms a contract or

bond that obligates their buying of alcohol for the members of the group in a future round of drinks. Thus, by not fulfilling their social responsibility to contribute to the communal drinking experience, the *moocher* breaks the bonds of reciprocity and, as a result of this betrayal, the group loses trust in the individual. There is a sort of threshold of acceptability with the practice of *mooching* and most friend groups seem to have a *moocher* in their midst. This means that an individual can shirk their responsibilities from time to time without much trouble from the group, but after a while of this behavior, the group will ostracize the individual from the commensal drinking activities until he/she begins to contribute, reconstituting the bonds of reciprocity.

Kenny Anderson is the *moocher* of Enid's friend group. He always partakes of the group's alcohol whether at one of the members apartments or at the Den, but when he is asked to buy the next round or next bottle of rum, he claims to have no money. For a while, this behavior prompted the group to often talk about him when he was not in the room, complaining that Kenny's behavior was passing the point of acceptability. Cassie, also member of this group, stated that she was going to hide her alcohol if he ever came over to her dorm room to drink and had already refused to buy him drinks at the Den. Enid joined in with a story about a Wednesday night at the Den when Kenny really "went too far" in his *mooching*. Enid and Kenny went up to the bar together to get drinks. Enid told Kenny, foolishly she says now, that she would buy his drink. They had been trying to catch the bartender's attention for a while when Enid decided that she would make a quick run to the restroom while they were waiting. She gave Kenny her credit card and told him to order drinks for the two of them, but that beer was definitely not an option. Upon her return to the group, she found that Kenny had used her money to buy a pitcher of beer. Enid was furious and vowed never to trust Kenny with her credit card or in reciprocal exchanges, in general, ever again. Kenny broke the bond of trust and reciprocity between Enid and himself, which resulted in similar vows from the members of the group who heard the story recounted the next day. Returning to the story of Tim and Cassie, it is possible that Tim seemed disheartened that Cassie would not share a drink with him because to him it would have completed their reunion ritual of sorts. Instead, she took the drink to another group of friends, an act that could be considered *mooching*, accepting a gift, in this case a drink, as part of a reciprocal exchange but refusing to return the gesture.

CONCLUSIONS

From this study I came to numerous conclusions regarding the nature of alcohol exchange on this college campus; however, the most significant one is the fact that social dynamics in the context of alcohol exchange are incredibly complex and cannot be easily restricted to a set of rules or laws. While this complexity is confusing and frustrating at times, there are certain factors that generate predictable reactions and behaviors. For example, economics are important to every individual but especially most college students, who are functioning on low budgets. At this college, in particular, most students do not have a source of income during the school year, so, as a result, in the context of the Den, where money is required to acquire alcohol, bonds of reciprocity are strictly monitored and enforced. The exchanges are highly relational in nature as no one is willing to risk losing money on a false friend. Thus every party night, a complex dance is performed by its student patrons that systematically reaffirms their values of reciprocity and community and successfully accomplishes their objective of commensal consumption of alcohol.

The Radcliffe parties are distinctly different as the alcohol is free to all who attend the party. The non-relational type of exchange that comprises the majority of the transactions models the capitalist system of which this community is a part. The objective, in this context, is to acquire alcohol as quickly as possible. The narrow avenue for reciprocal exchange that forms at the side of the bar area expedites the acquisition process and serves the additional purpose of showing off ones standing with the host organization to everyone in the beer line.

There is also the potential for the bonds of reciprocity and friendship reaffirmed through this exchange to play a role later when the Radcliffe party moves to the Den.

Layered onto this system of reciprocity is practice of territoriality, a behavior that governs the number or quality of exchange networks available to a certain group. At the Den, in particular, the “regulars” have established bonds of reciprocity with numerous friend groups outside of their own while the “non-regulars” maintain a more insular network. At Radcliffe parties, the hosts of the party and the people with which they have established ties of friendship have greater access to the alcohol and are entitled to faster service by the bartenders. Together, the systems of reciprocity and space ownership interplay to create a hierarchy of access that provides the college students with a means of acquiring alcohol and forming strong bonds within and between groups of friends.

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