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Research paper

Animal house: University risk environments and the regulation of students' alcohol use

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ABSTRACT

Background: This article extends the risk environment framework to understand the factors that universities identify as influencing university students' risky drinking behaviours and universities attempts at managing risky alcohol use on their campuses.
Methods: This article examines data collected as part of qualitative fieldwork on university corporate security services, and others involved in university alcohol policy implementation (e.g., residence services), conducted at five Canadian universities. Interviews (n = 56), fieldnotes from 246 h of observations of university corporate security personnel, and university policy documents (i.e., codes of student behaviour, residence policies) were analysed to understand the influence of risk environments on high-risk alcohol use.
Results: We identify three risk environments on university campuses in relation to the use and regulation of alcohol: the *physical*,*social*, and *policy* environments. Residence buildings and abutting spaces (physical risk environment) and the university "party" culture (social risk environment) are principal contributors to risk within their risk environments. University policies and practices (policy risk environment) attempt to modify these environments in order to manage risky alcohol use.
Conclusion: We suggest current approaches to regulating student alcohol use may not be the best approach to preventing harms (e.g., health problems, legal troubles) to students. Given university policies and practices have the potential to shape and influence risky alcohol use and associated harms we argue it is necessary for university administrators to adopt the best practices of "harm reduction" and seek new ways to address on-campus alcohol use.

Introduction

University campuses have long been considered havens for alcohol use. This reputation is perhaps well-earned as the majority of North American university students consume alcohol (American College Health Association, 2013, 2016), as do their counterparts in many Australasian, European, and South American countries (e.g., Bewick et al., 2008; Karam, Kypri, & Salamoun, 2007; Kypri et al., 2009; Stock et al., 2009; Webb, Ashton, Kelly, & Kamali, 1996). Adding to this reputation is students' proclivity for engaging in risky drinking practices (e.g., binge drinking and frequent drinking) which are known to increase alcohol-related harms, such as physical and sexual assault victimization, health problems (e.g., hangovers, blackouts, injury, overdose, death), academic issues (e.g., lower grades, missing classes), interpersonal conflicts (e.g., arguments, dating and relationship violence), unsafe sexual relations, which increase chances of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy, and drunk driving (Adlaf, Demers, & Gliksman, 2005; Bewick et al., 2008; Kypri et al., 2009; White & Hingson, 2014). The harms of risky drinking practices also affect students who do not use alcohol and the immediate environment through second-hand effects of excessive drinking, such as physical and sexual violence, sleep and study disruption, and property damage (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008; White & Hingson, 2014). To be sure, students' risky drinking does not go unopposed with universities attempting to manage when, where, and how students consume alcohol through work undertaken by various university services, including residence/housing services, risk management services (e.g., legal, policy standards, and insurance), student services, and university corporate security (UCS) services along with external organisations, such as public police, contract security, fire, and emergency medical services (Wilkinson, 2014).

Through research conducted with staff at five Canadian universities, this article explores factors contributing to students'

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risky alcohol use and how universities attempt to manage such behaviour. In this article, we extend the risk environment framework (Rhodes, 2009) to the university campus to help explain students' risky drinking practices. We suggest student drinking can be conceptualised as taking place within *physical* and *social* risk environments (as incubators of alcohol-related risks), which are shaped by the *policy* environment (university alcohol use policies) that targets *on-campus* risks through prohibitive and sometimes punitive measures. We propose these policies should be supplemented with other harm reduction strategies that could better protect students from alcohol-related harms experienced on campus and elsewhere. Given that in this article we examine a population (students) and location (university campuses) to which the risk environment framework had not yet been applied, and that we focus on the perspectives of those responsible for managing alcohol use, we broaden the scope of application of the risk environment framework and therefore make a unique contribution to the harm reduction literature.

Risk environments

A substantial body of research highlights the impact of social, physical, structural, economic, and other contextual/environmental factors on substance use and related risk behaviour, particularly within the "risk environment" literature (Rhodes, 2002, 2009; Rhodes et al., 2003; Rhodes, Singer, Bourgois, Friedman, & Strathdee, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2012). Risk environments are realms where multiple factors intersect to produce or influence risky behaviours and vulnerability to substance use-related harms (Rhodes, 2009). There are four types of risk environments: physical, social, policy, and economic (Rhodes et al., 2005).

The *physical environments* in which substance use occurs can shape risky activities (e.g., sharing needles) which increase the potential for harm (e.g., infection transmission, damage to veins, overdose) (Carlson, 2000; Rhodes et al., 2005; Shapshak et al., 2000; Thorpe, Ouellet, Levy, Williams, & Monterroso, 2000; Weeks et al., 2001). For instance, alleyways and other places on the spatial margins (e.g., car parks, under bridges, abandoned buildings, shooting galleries/crack houses) are commonly used to consume drugs out of the public eye. However, using drugs in such spaces often encourages risky activities such as rushing injections to avoid encounters with the police, or sharing injection equipment due to a lack of available harm reduction supplies (Cooper, Moore, Gruskin, & Krieger, 2005; Small, Kerr, Charette, Schechter, & Spittal, 2006). A study of street youth in Vancouver demonstrates that once participants became involved in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) a number of high-risk behaviours, including "problematic" substance use, became more prevalent due to exposure to, and subsequent deeper involvement in, a ubiquitous and open drug scene where substance use is more normalised than from where they previously came (Fast, Small, Wood, & Kerr, 2009; Fast, Shoveller, Shannon, & Kerr, 2010).

The *social environment* also shapes substance use and related risk behaviours (e.g., infrequent condom use, drug paraphernalia sharing, binge drinking) which are associated with negative social and health consequences (Andia, Deren, Robles, Kang, & Colon, 2008; Borsari & Carey, 2001; Ivsins, Roth, Benoit, & Fischer, 2014; Latkin, Kuramoto, Davey-Rothwell, & Tobin, 2010; Tobin, Davey-Rothwell, & Latkin, 2010). Research on college student drinking shows perceptions of heavy drinking among peers, and peer approval of this form of drinking, encourages higher personal alcohol consumption (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Similarly, in a study of driving under the influence (DUI), Fynbo and Järvinen (2011) found study participants normalise/legitimate their drink-driving by referring to a collective DUI social identity within their peer group, in which drink-driving is an acceptable behaviour. Gendered power relations have also been found to influence heavy drinking among female college students, whereby social norms of "drinking like a guy" elicit feelings of equality and power to be behaving as their male peers (Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, & D'arcy, 2005).

In the *policy environment*, substance use and prevention policy, and law enforcement practices can negatively impact substance users. A study of the impacts of a police crackdown in Vancouver's DTES found that intensified police presence resulted in riskier drug use practices such as rushing injections and using drugs in riskier locations (Small et al., 2006). Local law enforcement practices of confiscating or breaking crack pipes have also been found to negate the impact of harm reduction measures by encouraging crack pipe sharing (Ivsins, Roth, Nakamura, Krajden, & Fischer, 2011). Similarly, the *economic environment*, and related issues such as poverty and homelessness, is associated with increased vulnerability to substance use and related social and health problems. As Galea and Vlahov (2002) note, drug users make up a significant proportion of the homeless population. Numerous other studies associate economic marginalisation with substance use and related risk behaviours (Kalichman et al., 2006; Linton, Celentano, Kirk, & Mehta, 2013; Thompson, Wall, Greenstein, Grant, & Hasin, 2013).

While the bulk of research on risk environments focuses on injection drug use (IDU) (but see Fletcher, Bonell, Sorhaindo, & Rhodes, 2009; Pauly et al., 2016; Pilkington & Sharifullina, 2009) and substance use among marginalized populations (but see Measham, 2004a, 2004b), we see the potential utility of treating the framework as an analytical tool, as opposed to theoretical model, for exploring the regulation of university students' on-campus alcohol use. By focusing attention on the setting and context of alcohol use, we show that universities ascribe risky alcohol use and associated harmful activities to particular factors within risk environments. In doing so we demonstrate how alcohol use and related harms are influenced by broader environmental contexts, as opposed to rooted exclusively in individual behaviour and responsibility. However, the current approach to managing on-campus alcohol use focuses almost exclusively on student behaviour by attempting to limit risky drinking practices which, as we argue below, may have unintended consequences.

Methodology

Data were collected through fieldwork at five Canadian English-language universities between March 2012 and September 2013. This research was conducted by the first author who sought to produce the first multi-site empirical study of Canadian university corporate security (UCS) services, which employ Peace Officers, Special Constables and/or Security Officers (see Wilkinson, 2014:156 on types of UCS personnel). This research involved formal, semi-structured interviews conducted with 41 UCS services' personnel and 15 other university/university-affiliated staff involved in the management of risks on campus. These additional staff included four residence services' personnel, three individuals involved in code of student behaviour development/adjudication, two senior managers from risk management services, one risk manager, one emergency planner, one policy development planner, one lawyer, one staff member from a department responsible for identifying/helping at-risk individuals, and one manager of a university students' society. Additionally, 246 h of observations, in which UCS officers were shadowed during their shifts, were conducted. These observations focused on front-line UCS officers as they went about their work, including activities related to the management of student alcohol use (e.g., enforcement of university policy/state laws, medical response), and were