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Gender and Party Culture on College Campuses

**Field Site and Subject Matter**

As a first-time resident assistant (RA), I have been more involved with residence life at Saint Mary’s. While I always thought that RAs had a lot of responsibilities during the academic year, I did not realize how rigorous the training schedule was at the beginning of the school year. During training, our resident life director pointed out to us one of the biggest issues within our student body: alcohol. Much of our training focused on how to deal with students, under the age of 21 especially, who either are intoxicated or store alcohol in their rooms. Additionally, most college students that I have talked to in the past find that a considerable amount of first-years tend to excessively imbibe either at tailgates or social functions with alcohol present. My first question asks why do people participate in this college tradition. I also have wondered why do many female students from Saint Mary’s like to go to parties either at Notre Dame or off-campus. Since I have started college, I have wondered why there is little to no party culture on the Saint Mary’s campus, whereas Notre Dame’s administration seems much more lenient on students, specifically males, hosting social functions. Plus, hardly any female dorms at Notre Dame have a reputation for hosting parties, which leads me to ask why do men mainly host many parties.

I preformed part of my research around 11:00 PM Friday, October 29 to early morning Saturday October 30 at an off-campus party which was hosted by an anonymous friend of mine.

**Methodology**

I conducted my research through a series of interviews and participant observation. All of my interviewees will remain anonymous under pseudonyms. For my interviews, I came with a series of base questions, but I asked additional questions if I was curious about something else. Some of the questions were: Would you describe yourself as an introvert or extrovert? Why? What are the rules at your school on alcohol and parties? What issues have you seen come up when hosting/attending parties? In your experience with going to parties, do you see trends with parties that are majority male attendees? Majority female attendees?

I interviewed six students who attend either Saint Mary’s or the University of Notre Dame. I spent about an hour or so either writing down or typing their responses to the questions I asked. I thought it was important to speak with students of all years to get a wide range of data. I would be able to see a first-year’s perspective versus a senior’s, and I could see any variances among those who were under 21 and above the legal drinking age. For instance, I interviewed a 22-year-old male student from Notre Dame called Mark. He is currently a senior, whom I have often encountered at several functions. He also is known around both campuses at Saint Mary’s and Notre Dame for frequently hosting parties. With his reputation, I thought his perspective would be optimum for my research. I also talked to a female Notre Dame student, Claire, so that I could see her point of view which might differ from my other four informants who were students from Saint Mary’s. Because her campus is generally overall see as more lenient on hosting parties, she could provide me with information on why women’s dorms do not host parties often. Moreover, I interviewed people, friends mainly, who I knew definitely liked going to parties and others who may not be as keen on attending parties. Those who like going to parties might have more to say about the types of trends they see at social functions, while those who are more indifferent about their like or dislike for parties could offer a more objective view that I might miss on my own since I personally enjoy going to parties.

I additionally attended a party strictly to observe the party culture – how people interacted with each other, the attire attendees wore, and the types of beverages available. I used my phone’s “notes” application since it would be difficult to write on paper in the dark space of a party. Since it was Halloween weekend, it was easy to find parties to attend just by asking around to my peers and one of the students I interviewed. I also wanted to see the diversity of male and female attendees as well as the ethnic diversity. I think the atmosphere is different if there are majority white attendees as opposed to majority people of color.

**Results and Analysis**

The interviews provided a great wealth of information to my research. Age is not a factor that does not stop students from going out and drinking alcohol. Personal values and past experiences seemed more so to be the factor that hindered students from drinking alcohol at social functions. For instance, Aileen, a 19-year-old sophomore, explained that she enjoys attending parties for the dancing aspect, but she does not participate in drinking because her father has a negative outlook on the effects of alcoholism. Her paternal grandfather was an alcoholic, and then her father chose not to drink for the rest of his life. She also believes that, “No one needs to drink alcohol to have fun.” Moreover, the two seniors who I spoke to seemed to provide the most insight on the relationship between gender, parties, and alcohol. Julia and Mark both described that many of their friends or people they have seen at parties demonstrate either signs of aggression and panic, if the treat of police arriving occurs. They are also more willing to have sexual encounters.

The party that I went to was off-campus at a house. There were both spaces inside of the house and outside for people to congregate. Inside the house, hot, stale air engulfed every person who entered, triggering an immediate sweat. The first floor was dark and congested with about equal ratios men and women. On the perimeters of the first and second rooms, men and women danced provocatively (popular type of close partner dance called grinding) to blaring rap music. It seemed that when popular songs came on, then attendees would chant along with the lyrics. Those who were not dancing were either talking to other attendees, drinking, or on their phones as well. There was an area designated to beverages. A sign that read, “Drinks for 21 and over only” was present. I learned that this sign is set up to put the responsibility on the party-goers who are deciding whether to drink or not. Outside there was a table set up where people played a well-known drinking game called beer pong. There was no music playing outside so most people were just talking to other people or on their phones as well. Many used their phones to take pictures or “selfies” with other individuals. A cycle of people entered and left the house until the end of the party. People congregated in front of the house, which was discouraged by the party’s host since it might attract police.

Since it was Halloween weekend, many people who attended the party were dressed in costumes, which is typically a tradition within the United States. These costumes varied in which some were very elaborate (hot dog suits and mermaids) and others simpler (cats and “frat boys”). I participated in this tradition by dressing up as Rosie the Riveter. Other people dressed in regular clothes too. Most females who attended tended to have a full face of makeup on with lighter clothing despite the fact that it was chilly. Males attire varied from sweats to sharper outfits including button-down shirts, jeans, and dress shoes.

After about forty-five minutes, an older Hispanic male approached me and asked me if I wanted to dance. However, I respectfully declined saying, “Sorry, I have a boyfriend.” He rolled his eyes and yelled over the music at me, “Then, why are you here?” and moved away from me. The male’s response, while I might call initially rude, actually gave me good insight on why females might attend parties and why students at Saint Mary’s may not host parties. Most people go to parties to meet other people to make new friends, “hook-up” for a single night, or possibly date in the future. This was confirmed by many of my informants when I asked them why they personally think a lot of female students attend parties at Notre Dame or off-campus. Students at SMC do not host parties not only because it is not tolerated under school rules but more so because the prime function of a party is to establish some sort of relationship with individuals (mainly males) they do not know. This could include obtaining the phone number of another person, for example. To further add, Saint Mary’s is known for its tight-knit community so many students already know others to varying degrees, while Notre Dame has an obviously bigger campus with more students who are less likely to know each other.

There seems to be an unspoken bias that men can host these social functions and females have a more difficult time. Females from Saint Mary’s and Notre Dame may not host parties just because it is not a not a common trend on either campus, while male students are already known to hold parties which is more of a social norm. If females do host parties, then it is more so for a specific celebration like a twenty-first birthday party, for instance, with fellow kin. They are not likely to host parties for no specific reason like males. Moreover, those females who are in relationships with a significant other are less likely to attend parties because they “do not feel the need to” as some of my informants have mentioned.

**Critique of Methodology**

I did not run into any issues with any of my interviews. All of my informants were very willing and open to share their opinions and past experiences. I do think my project would be more successful if I could talk to even more students especially Notre Dame students because it could further confirm my initial questions. However, at the party, there were definitely times where I felt uncomfortable mainly because I am underage which is against school rules. I would not know how else to fix this issue besides waiting to turn 21. Plus, I was worried if the police came to shut down the party since that would clearly hinder my research.

**Conclusions**

This research gave me more insight on the purpose a college tradition that I normally partake in. Many parties have alcohol available to drink, but it is not the primary factor that people choose to attend a party. In addition to stress-relief, dancing, and general merriment, parties are a means of getting to know people from the community. A party provides an atmosphere that encourages, or pressures, its attendees to do things they might not necessarily do in daily student life. Men are more likely to host these types of social functions which is not unlike Balinese cockfighting as we have explored in class. Cockfighting is a gathering with a set of persons who are engrossed in a common flow of activity. According to Clifford Geertz, it also allows its participants to let all of their frustrations since generally the Balinese people are very nice on a daily basis. This can be seen as very similar to the party culture at Saint Mary’s and Notre Dame. Students focus their efforts during the week to study and do homework, and on the weekends they use parties to celebrate and relax. Parties and cockfighting have a secretive factor to them. For instance, cockfighting is illegal in Bali, but the Balinese do it anyways because it is a tradition that brings people together. Underage students still go to parties even if alcohol is present because they want a release from frustrations, especially in a city with limited opportunities to explore, and to meet new individuals. Moreover, cockfighting is a means of attaining/losing power. Hosting parties is not necessarily a means of attaining status, but the more alcohol available, the more people are content. They will then communicate to others how they approve of the party or not.

Parties are a longtime tradition during college life that I do not see ending at all in the near future in this area of South Bend. This research can lead to further exploration of the party culture on other college campuses and even other countries as well.