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As Long as They're Not Driving: A Qualitative Exploration of the Influence of a Designated Driver on Alcoholic Beverage Servers' Hypothetical Willingness to Serve Beyond Intoxication

ABSTRACT: Prior research has demonstrated that the presence of a designated driver increases alcohol consumption of non-driving patrons. This prompts the question of whether the presence of a designated driver would increase the willingness of alcoholic beverage servers to over-serve, disregarding other types of intoxication-related harm. A qualitative project was undertaken to examine circumstances under which alcoholic beverage servers working in college bars would hypothetically be willing to knowingly serve a patron beyond intoxication. Because overconsumption is a particularly acute public health problem on college campuses, a set of in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with servers who reported that they worked in bars commonly frequented by college students. Three findings were very clear: 1) most servers expressed a hypothetically willingness to serve beyond intoxication if the patron were accompanied by a designated driver; 2) non-driving-related harm due to intoxication appeared to be far removed from the conscious awareness of most servers; and 3) when awareness was primed, servers neutralized their personal responsibility for non-driving-related harm by assigning most of the responsibility for any and all types of harm to the patrons, especially the designated driver.

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Introduction

Alcohol intoxication and its consequences represent particularly acute problems on college campuses. College students are more likely to consume, to drink heavily, and to have more alcohol-related problems than non-college students (Cooper 2002; Hingson et al. 2002; Knight et al. 2002; Perkins 2002; Wechsler et al. 1994).

One of the more commonly promoted strategies to curtail alcohol-related harm among college students by both higher education administrators and the National Institute on Alcohol Use and Alcoholism (NIAAA) is the use of a designated driver. While research with college students has found frequent use of designated drivers, it has also found that designated drivers often did not abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages (Barr and MacKinnon, 1998; DeJong and Winsten, 1999; Glascoff and Knight 1994; Kazbour and Bailey 2010; Timmerman et al. 2003). Further, critics have suggested the presence of a designated driver may encourage heavier drinking among companions, although research supporting this contention remains mixed (Glascoff and Knight 1994; Timmerman et al. 2003). These findings indicate that some have distorted the original designated driver message, which was “If you choose to drink, drink only in moderation, and choose a designated driver who doesn’t drink at all.” (Winsten 1994:13).

While the Designated Driver Program is designed to target drinkers as the intervention point, little attention has addressed the impact of this program on alcoholic-beverage servers in public drinking places. This is particularly important as research has indicated that college students of legal drinking age report consuming more in public locations such as college bars than at private parties (Clapp et al. 2006). Although both criminal and civil penalties exist for servers who serve alcoholic beverages to intoxicated patrons, modes of transportation are not a

consideration under these laws. Nonetheless, the use of designated drivers might reduce servers' concerns for legal liability and alcohol-related harm.

In previous research conducted by the authors, approximately 44% of licensed servers employed in various venues reported some level of willingness to knowingly serve intoxicated customers, and do so with little fear of either civil or criminal penalties, (authors, 2004). Of greater interest to this current inquiry is that of the servers who reported a willingness to knowingly over-serve, 80% of those reported a willingness to do so if a designated driver were present (authors, 2006).

To the extent college students represent one of the heaviest drinking populations with related rates of alcohol-related risks, the presence of a designated driver on servers' willingness to over-serve on college campuses warrants specific attention. Accordingly, our project was undertaken to explore in a qualitative fashion three key questions: 1) what would be the impact of the presence of a designated driver on servers' hypothetical willingness to knowingly over-serve; 2) what would be servers' awareness of potential non-driving, intoxication-related harm to a designated driver's drinking companions; 3) and how would servers respond to this awareness, in both their cognition and affect?

Our analysis of the latter question is framed around Sykes and Matza's (1967) formulation of techniques of neutralization among deviants. Commonly applied to a wide range of deviant behaviors, this framework attempts to understand why deviants see no harm in their actions and feel warranted in continuing such. The five methods of neutralization they identified involve: denial of responsibility; denial of injury; denial of victim; condemnation of condemners; and appeal to higher loyalty, most commonly a deviant subculture that instills and fosters subterranean values. We believe that this theory enhances our understandings of servers in

college bar settings who are willing to continue to over-serve despite knowledge of intoxication-related problems other than driving.

Methodology

Given the intricate, sensitive, and virtually unexplored nature of these questions, a qualitative examination based on a set of in-depth face-to-face interviews was needed (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 1990). Data for this research were collected within a mid-size metropolitan area, located in a mid-central state. This setting contained several large, public universities and numerous community colleges. The population for this study was “servers” (either bartenders or waitstaff who had direct contact with patrons, and who were in the position to allow or deny further service) who self-defined employment in “college bars”.

Servers were recruited via flyers posted on public message boards at the universities and community colleges. Because the data would be qualitative, a self-selected, purposeful sampling design was deemed appropriate, “selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton 1990:169).

The recruitment plan eliminated the need to inform bar management of the research, which could have created several problems possibly biasing responses. Interviews were conducted in the faculty office of the Principle Investigator.

Even though recruitment was pursued vigorously and the data collection period left open longer than initially planned, efforts resulted in the completion of only 17 in-depth, qualitative interviews. It was clear more interviews could have been collected had we offered compensation. In fact, the only reason ever stated by the numerous inquirers for declining to be interviewed was that there was no monetary benefit attached. However, because of the possibility that participants would self-report illegal behavior (even though asked to speak in

only hypothetical terms on this matter) and to avoid possible coercion and reduce the likelihood of soliciting socially-desirable responses, compensation was not offered.

Description of Sample

Most of the respondents were male (12/17), around 25 years of age. None of the respondents viewed alcohol service as a long-term career option. Most of the male respondents reported to have or to have had a rather heavy personal consumption pattern (10/12 males), but most of the female respondents reported themselves to be only social drinkers. Four of the respondents reported themselves to have developed what they characterized as problem drinking, which they associated quite strongly with their alcohol service. Most reported having consumed alcohol while serving and every respondent reported having observed other servers consuming alcohol while serving.

All of the respondents reported the ability to “earn good money” through tips as the primary reason for choosing serving as their current occupation, followed by “flexible schedule.” This coincides with the finding that all subjects were also college students while working as servers.

Results

Three findings were very clear: 1) most servers expressed a hypothetically willingness to serve beyond intoxication if the patron were accompanied by a designated driver; 2) non-driving-related harm due to intoxication appeared to be far removed from the conscious awareness of most servers; and 3) when awareness was primed, servers neutralized their personal responsibility for non-driving-related harm by assigning most of the responsibility for any and all types of harm to the patrons, especially the designated driver.

Denial of Responsibility

“I think that the patron should be responsible for their own intoxication, but legally, I think it’s completely bizarre that that server um, somehow should know every single patron and know how much they should take and are responsible for that person having too much.”

According to Sykes and Matza, denial of responsibility occurs when the deviance that resulted in harm is believed by the actor to be the responsibility of outside forces. It was clear that the impact of the presence of a designated driver on hypothetical willingness to over-serve was that it gave servers “license” to over-serve. Because of the heavy emphasis on drunk-driving as a social problem and, more importantly, a designated driver as the solution, in almost every case, responsibility was given over to the designated driver for any drunk-driving that might occur, and by extension, even non-driving intoxication-related harm. In this way, responsibility for all types of harm was significantly neutralized. Application of this technique of neutralization allowed servers to justify their action as simply doing the patrons’ bidding by continuing to serve. If harm did result, the fault would lay with the designated driver, as well as the driver’s drinking companions, having chosen, after all, the designee.

Frequently, the mere presence of the designated driver further absolved the server from responsibility because the designee reportedly quite commonly consumed alcohol, too. It was very clear during the interviews that being a designed driver to prevent drunk driving for most meant, as one server explained, “... it’s OK to drive drunk friends home as long as you’re not too drunk yourself.” The resultant attitude of the server can best be summed up as: “Why should we care if they do not?”

In fact, the frequency with which servers reported that many times the designated driver also consumed alcohol or in fact became intoxicated was disturbing: “...a majority of the time it was don’t drink as much. Because their friends would be pounding shots the entire night and

they would maybe order like one or two. It was rarely that there was a DD didn't drink at all."

The following statements illustrate several aspects of the servers' dilemma:

"Yea. Because I even know just how I am. I've been a designated driver, but in my book, that means, "I'm a designated driver so my limit tonight is two drinks" where, you know, they can have as many as they want, I mean, so. I'm still drinking, but yet that makes me the designated driver and I always feel like the other person, who, whenever somebody else is out and they claim they have a designated driver, I feel like that designated driver could be doing the same thing. "

"...I mean they (servers) pretty much over serve to anybody if there was a designated driver present or not."

"...I know when I haven't been behind the bar, and I've been the designated driver for somebody else, you know, I was served a lot. I'm a little more cautious about that only because I know even me myself, being a designated driver for somebody else, I've had some drinks. So, I don't feel comfortable when I'm serving drinks to somebody who says they have a designated driver because at the same time a designated driver most likely would be drinking too. And I'm getting this person wasted, and then you know how much the designated driver's had to drink."

Clearly, for most servers interviewed, the mere existence of someone designated as the driver absolves them of their legal server responsibilities regardless of the driver's drinking behavior.

Denial of Injury

Denial of injury occurs when it is believed that no harm occurs to the would-be target. Servers' responses indicate concerns for alcohol-related problems are significantly narrowed by considerations of setting. Rarely does injury due to intoxication occur in servers' presence, thus: "out of sight out of mind." As one respondent noted, "...once your id'ed the level of intoxication is less important, maybe because they're walking. I think management kind of has this idea that once they leave the restaurant that it's done. They leave and that's it, it doesn't matter what happens to them." Once patrons leave the setting, servers become unaware (and therefore not responsible) of any injury resulting from intoxication.

Servers' awareness of non-driving-intoxication-related harm was quite secondary to their awareness of drunk-driving. In most cases, non-driving-related harm was not even acknowledged without prompting, and then was likely slow to emerge. Those who were able to generate examples without prompting almost always reported an example remembered from their server training rather than an internalized awareness or experience. In a several cases, prompting was ineffective, and the interviewer had to outright name other types of alcohol-related harm. When prompting was necessary, the servers seemed surprised, a bit troubled, and embarrassed to have not made the connection themselves, but those affective states were quickly neutralized.

Knowledge of the possibility of alcohol poisoning and alcoholism were the most common potential harms named. Violence and accidents were the least likely to be named first and required deeper probing, as the following example illustrates: "...As far as people taking whatever happened there with them, uh as far as any domestic abuse or something like that I never thought about it."

Quite the opposite of causing harm, from the servers' vantage point, as one stated, "We make life good." Therefore servers clearly failed to recognize numerous non-driving problems that may result from intoxication. Indeed, this denial of injury is supported when society itself primarily identifies driving under the influence as the primary problem related to intoxication.

Another important understanding to emerge was that denial of injury may have been a self-protective strategy employed as a buffer against the difficulty in assessing intoxication. If the tipping point is difficult to determine, a high level of vigilance and monitoring would be necessary, difficult to achieve in this setting. As a consequence, these aspects of their job simply get ignored.

“The additive element of alcohol really and the time it takes to actually uh get to somebody. Um. I..you know you bring, “oh I’ll just have one” and then you have, they get through that and are like “well I’m still here, I might as well get the next one.” I’m like “ok.” Then it just keeps kinda goes downhill from there...I know somebody that never thinks that they drink more they should. But uh there have been times where they would drive somewhere, and then as soon as they got out of their car they would puke on the side of the road. They would feel fine. Uh, I know a lot of people that are unfortunately very capable drivers. Uh. who knows how much they drink. They don’t realize, I mean, and probably blow right now, two drinks you blow over and uh DUI ‘s kind of accumulate with people. Really, it’s almost a babysitting program for the server where um, they have to keep monitoring all the time. Uh. And like a shot doesn’t really take effect for a little bit and is such a small amount of drink that it’s almost not satisfying at all. So, it’s not even put into how much people think they can drink. I don’t think really people understand how much they can drink and be ok.”

Denial of Victim Status

Denial of the victim status has generally been conceptualized as a disallowance of victim status out of revenge or the sense that the “victim” got what they deserved. The latter attribution, that the patron is responsible for their own “victimization,” was clearly evidenced.

Most servers reported they would not feel personally responsible for intoxication-related harm if the patron were accompanied by a designated driver, and in fact, assumed almost no level of personal responsibility even if the patron was not accompanied by a designated driver. As one server noted, “It’s just, I don’t know if I would necessarily feel sorry or feel bad about that, so, I mean, kind of, I know that sounds kind of wrong.”

All of the servers interviewed had much greater concern for driving-related than non-driving-related harm. The common reasoning was that “...innocent people could get hurt.” This position, of course, was based upon the assumption that non-driving-related harm would be victimless.

The greatest resistance to assume any level of responsibility was encountered when asked about alcohol-related violence or non-driving accidents. Almost every server attributed violent behavior to the internal disposition of the patron rather than to the alcohol. There was also

responsibility assigned to the patron for "...living in the kind of environment where violence would occur." Accidents were blamed on internal deficits in patrons' ability to control their behavior or bodies or to make good decisions. In other words, they would deserve what they got.

"Um, you have that, you have you know violence, alcohol brings out violence in a lot of people. They get a little drunk and, you know, the courage comes out and all the sudden, somebody accidentally bumps into you at the bar and, you know, the littlest guy thinks that he's superman and can try to take on the biggest guy in the bar. It's liquid courage. Because it's usually the person that's the quietest throughout the day that doesn't seem to want to harm anybody that's just their own and once they get that little bit of drink in them where they start to get a little bit of a buzz, then all the sudden, anything that they've ever had a problem with, darn it, it'll come right out and they've got something to say about it and they put a stop to it in a heartbeat, you know. It's definitely their liquid courage..."

"I guess I would probably feel that it was their own fault (if fell down stairs), um, I would not blame the server unless I had seen that person drunk in the bar, and unless I was under the impression that the server should have stop severing that person before that. Um, we talked about the percentages of responsibility, legally I do think that it's definitely the server's responsibility, but I don't think it should be that way and I really think it should have been that person's job, or their friend's job to monitor their own drinking. Um, I don't really think it's my business to monitor someone's drinking or to try and tell them how much they can and cannot have. Um, I think it's no different than if a person were to go to a party, a New Year's Eve party and have too much to drink and fall down the stairs and killed themselves. That's their fault. It's not the fault of the person who hosted the party. Um, they shouldn't drink Smirnoff."

The second strongest resistance was in accepting any level of responsibility for alcohol poisoning. The common reason given was that it was impossible for a server to judge how a patron's body would process the alcohol. The sentiment expressed was that some bodies just do not tolerate alcohol as well as they "should." In those cases, the person should know their body well enough to know that they should not drink very much, or they should not drink at all. Again, the patron would be getting what they asked for when they entered the bar.

Condemnation of Condemners

Condemnation of condemners occurs when the deviant accuses the accusers of being hypocrites, allowing them to neutralize their deviance by making it comparable to that of the victim. The servers attempted to thwart responsibility for intoxication by turning the tables on

their patrons, as well as their designated drivers. The affective response of the respondents was of greater significance than their words. At this point in the interview, without exception, they became highly animated, seemingly angry, when discussing the role of the patrons and managers in over-serving, more so toward the patrons. The question clearly evoked the tension servers feel when caught between the demands of the patrons and managers to continue to serve and the demands of their own consciousness and the law (civil and criminal penalties) to do otherwise: damned if they did and damned if they didn't.

“Now on the other hand, it goes the other way. Sometimes groups of people will come in and they'll be celebrating a person's birthday or promotion and the goal is to get that person drunk. And that person will be saying, no, I'm done, I don't want anymore. But, one of his friends will whisper in my ear, “bring him another drink, I'll pay for it”. So, those situations are tough.

“Um, people come from other bars already drunk, and you may not know that. They may have had three drinks before they got there and the drinks have not hit them yet and if, to you, you start serving them at ground zero, and you don't actually know that they've actually already had three. Regardless, you're still responsible for those three they've already had. And I don't think that's right, I don't think that I should have to know that. And it's not something you should ask anyone.”

“...I think (people use a designated driver because) they want to sound responsible, but then when it gets down to the bar scene...they see everyone else drinking and they don't want to be the lone person sitting in the corner with their pop. While everybody else is acting stupid and drunk, you know.”

Because all of the subjects indicate the ability to make good money as the primary reason for employment as a server, pressure to over-serve stem from both management as employers and patrons as tippers. These pressures, however, also allow for servers to justify illegal acts through the hypocrisy of employers and patrons and the “noble” need to commit the acts through economic necessity.

Appeal to Higher Loyalty

Appeal to higher loyalty involves a belief that one must engage in deviance in order to serve a greater good, most commonly a deviant subculture that instills and fosters subterranean

values. It was clear that the bar scene was a deviant subculture and management, fellow co-workers, and patrons functioned to foster subterranean values. The following excerpt illustrates well several dynamics at play within this context:

“She (employer) said we weren’t (allowed to drink on the job), but it was kind of like an unsaid thing that you had to, because the more you drank the more money you made...She would always tell us to push shots, and that meant that they (patrons) want to do shots with you, which meant that you were drinking on the job. So she would say that I don’t want you to drink on the job, but she would kind of look the other way I guess when it came time for you to make her a bunch of money. She was the one that owned the bar...they’d (patrons) paid for our drinks and then usually (we) got tipped extra when you did shots with the customers...The nights that I drank I always made way more money than nights that I didn’t. I ended up getting out of it (alcohol service) because I started drinking too much.”

Even though the manager in this case supposedly did not allow drinking on the job, it is a common practice that is not prohibited by alcohol-service legislation in most states (including the setting for this study). Given that there is some evidence that those who drink on the job report a greater willingness to over-serve (authors), the manner in which this “fringe benefit” facilitates neutralization deserves further attention.

Appeal to the subterranean value of making money at all costs was clear. Making money was a highly important and justifiable reason to deflect responsibility for over-serving: it was, after all, their job to sell the product. If the product did not sell, business finances, their personal finances, and the finances of their fellow employees would suffer.

“It’s what it is. It’s the restaurant business, the bartending business. It’s a means. Its quick, fast cash that you get in your pocket at that point and time....”

“...people want to come to a bar to drink. And the more you let people drink, the more fun they have, the more they like your restaurant, the more they come back again and the more money they bring. Even if that person’s intoxicated, the more they’re drinking, the more money that manager gets in his pocket.”

“I don’t like to do it (deny service), because even though the manager is the one who goes to them and says “you’re done drinking for the night”. Um, it looks bad for me and the whole table sees that and I could have been serving that table for three hours and I’ll be left with zero money

from that table. And when you've only had five tables, um, three hours is a long time to not be getting paid."

"Um, another type of conflict is, unfortunately, most I would imagine 98% of the people that are serving, possibly more, uh, or bartending are there of course to make money. And one rule of thumb even before you're 21 and you're serving it, hey if there's alcohol served at your establishment, that soups up the bill so much because you can have like 2 drinks and it's like 10 dollars and of course you get tipped on the percentage, or at least you would hope you would get tipped on the percentage of the bill as well as your service". And so that has a big determining factor, I don't think a lot of people really care to be honest with you (about over-serving), which is sad."

"I'm going to say unfortunately yes (would work in alcohol service again). Because like I said...since I did get laid off on Monday, I need to get a job immediately. Um, I would love to work in a record store or work in a music store. I can't afford to. I mean I've kinda been pampered with the fact of like this industry. I'm good at it and especially it's kind of almost common knowledge. Most places won't even hire servers without experience or at least without some kind of server experience. I have a ton. And it's really good money for the least amount of hours."

Conclusions

Although the present inquiry is limited by the sample size, findings warrant close attention because of the severity of both driving-related and non-driving related harm. In this study, the respondents expressed a clear willingness to use the presence of a designated driver to neutralize their legal responsibility for not over-serving. Indeed, servers were willing to excuse their over-serving by claiming no-harm-done if the drinker was not driving.

These findings highlight an unintended consequence of the designated driver program, but also a fundamental weakness in its theoretical formulation. These findings suggest that the presence of a designated driver may actually increase the frequency and severity of intoxication and likely related problems among patrons because of the bartenders increased willingness to over-serve. In addition, the designated driver often is redefined not as sober, but rather, not as intoxicated as everyone else. Additionally, these findings highlight weaknesses in the development of harm reduction policies that narrowly focus on a single problem and fail to

recognize the latent or indirect functions policy may have on other problems related to drinking behaviors.

Given servers' willingness to over-serve, understanding the defenses they utilize for violating legal and ethical responsibilities become key points to address in any effective intervention/prevention strategy. To begin, efforts to establish required training and licensing standards for servers need to include understandings of linkages between intoxication and all associated problems. Server training programs also need to more clearly identify valid indicators of patron intoxication. To the extent these indicators are unknown only highlights the need for research in this area. Training must also include understandings of server responsibility towards patrons after leaving the establishment and the range of potential harm other than simply drunk driving.

At a larger policy level, while servers represent a valuable intervention point in problem drinking, cross-cutting pressures for servers must be recognized and addressed to develop successful policy. Servers experience pressures to over-serve from employers, patrons, and the subcultural values supported within the college bar and other drinking cultures and locations. Effective policy must identify ways to counter or overcome these pressures. At this point, they clearly do not.

While college administrations are becoming more concerned about controlling drinking and related problems, they have no control over servers' behavior. To the extent these issues apply to all servers, regardless of location, policy initiatives need to be established at the state level. At a minimum, policy needs to clearly delineate who is responsible for intoxication and its consequences, make servers aware of these responsibilities and hold them accountable for failure to accept their legal responsibilities.

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