

# Research on Women's Drinking



*H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., is a professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. He has conducted extensive research over the last 15 years on alcohol and other drug problems among college students and young adults, with a focus on peer misperceptions of alcohol and other drug norms, proactive prevention strategies, gender-related aspects of drug use, and stress and drinking. In 1997, he received the faculty prize for outstanding service to the college community, which honored his work to reduce alcohol abuse among students. He also received the 1999 Network Outstanding Service Award (see page 9). Perkins has served on the Review Group for the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention.*

**Q:** Some say that as women gain equality with men, college women are starting to drink more like their male classmates. What have you found in your research on the drinking behavior of college students?

**A:** As a general proposition, that's not true. Women are not drinking more like men. In fact, there are only a few indicators for which we might make that argument. For example, the frequency of drinking by women has increased over time, so that women seem to be a little closer to men on measures such as how often they drink. But if we look at all the other kinds of measures—amounts they consume, high-risk, episodic drinking—or what has been called “binge drinking”—those measures do not show any closing of the gap between the drinking behavior of men and women.

Actually, the only major pattern of convergence we see between men and women is in illicit drug use—not because women are starting to use drugs more like men, but because drug use in general is decreasing. Because men were using more drugs to begin with, in an ironic way, men are becoming more like women in terms of drug use.

**Q:** Some critics of the marketing tactics of the alcohol beverage industry say that, in order to protect the market, it has aggressively targeted women. Do you think that marketing has had any influence on the drinking behavior of women?

**A:** It may play some role in the frequency with which women drink. But I think the main influence on that frequency is that it's becoming more socially acceptable for women to drink in public than it used to be. It has not, however, become more socially acceptable for women to drink heavily.

The differences in the drinking behavior of men and women have to do with negative consequences. Some people have said women are experiencing more negative consequences today from drinking than they used to. But based on available research, I suggest that's not the case. Rather, we are paying more attention to the kinds of consequences that women are more likely to experience.

Historically, we focused almost exclusively on the negative consequences of heavy alcohol consumption in public, which had to do with legal infractions and other things that, in general, involve men more than women. For the most part, society still allows men to act more deviantly in public than women. Therefore, men are much more likely to be involved in property damage, alcohol-impaired driving, and fights and altercations. They are more likely to hurt other people and so forth.

In terms of consequences to oneself, such as academic problems, women experience those more often than hurting others. As for the most personal kinds of problems, such as blackouts, memory loss, nausea, hangovers, vomiting, and thoughts about committing suicide, college women and men experience

those equally. Nevertheless, there's no evidence to suggest that those problems have increased—we're just paying more attention to them.

**Q:** Do you believe that differences in drinking levels and the kinds of problems between women and men dictate the need for gender-specific prevention?

**A:** We need to pay attention to the biological differences. The traditional view is that people who drink at the same levels are likely to experience similar problems. But we've known for a long time that women become intoxicated after fewer drinks than men do.

This difference is due to three major reasons. First, women have a lower average body weight than men, so their blood-alcohol level per drink is higher. Second, the fat-to-water ratio for women is higher than it is for men, which means that alcohol concentrations in the water portion are going to be higher. People are less aware of the third difference, which is that women metabolize alcohol less efficiently than men do. They have less of the stomach enzyme that begins breaking down the alcohol before it reaches the liver. Taking those things together, on average it's much easier for a woman to get intoxicated by consuming the same number of drinks as her male companion. We need to take that difference into account in prevention, education, and measurements of risk levels.

We also need to pay attention to the different contexts in which women drink, especially if they drink

# Patterns: Q&A with Wes Perkins

heavily. A man who drinks heavily is almost always drinking with male peers. The motivation to drink heavily among college men is often a peer-bonding behavior influenced by a misperception that “that’s what most males do.” In fact, most college men do not drink heavily, but some men do follow that imaginary social norm to pursue their gender identity. Thus, he ends up drinking heavily with a small group of predominantly male heavy drinkers. On the down side, he has a lot of male friends egging him on. But he also has a number of male friends there to pick him up and, to some extent, protect him from walking out in front of a car or from falling down the stairs. At least his friends can get him to the hospital if need be. He is within a group that often will provide some kinds of protection for him, albeit weak ones.

A woman who drinks very heavily has a different set of choices. One is to drink alone, because it’s still not socially acceptable for a woman to drink heavily.

Drinking in private has its own set of risks. She could overdose, with no one there to take her to the hospital; she could also choke on her own vomit. These risks are to her own health. But if she opts to drink with a group, it’s likely to be predominantly with heavily drinking males. When there are four men to just one of her, she risks acquaintance rape or unplanned sex. For her, the negative consequences of heavy drinking are much different from those for a man.

**Q:** Much of your research has focused on social norms and their impact on drinking behavior. Have you found any differential effect of social norms campaigns between men and women in terms of changes in drinking behavior?

**A:** Sometimes women may actually misperceive the norms more than men do for drinking in general. Clearly, the perception of women’s drinking, by both men and women, is that women drink much less than men. But while the stereotype about men’s drinking is more skewed and more misperceived than the stereotype of women’s drinking, women are equally carriers of the misperception and pass it on in the campus community as much as men do.

Stress is one reason that many students drink. But they also say they drink for all kinds of other reasons. We have developed this notion that drinking to cope and drinking for stress are particularly dangerous, but so are social drinking, drinking to fulfill social pressure, participating in drinking games, and drinking to be like one of the crowd.

On the surface there’s no reason to think that drinking to cope with stress is more dangerous than drinking for any other reason—students have all kinds of reasons for drinking. But I have found that

women, from their early college years to their transition out of college, disproportionately report drinking to cope with stress. As for who experiences the negative consequences of drinking the most, for men it’s not necessarily those who say they are drinking to cope with stress—it is more often those who drink for social reasons. Typically,

the men who drink for social reasons experience the most negative consequences. However, college women who say they drink for stress-motivated reasons experience as many negative consequences as women who drink for other reasons. But as women transition out of college, those who drink to cope with stress experience even more negative consequences than do other women.

That’s a pattern in men as well—drinking for stress-related reasons increasingly becomes the most problematic. But men start on that track later in life. Women get on the stress- coping drinking track earlier than men do and start experiencing the negative consequences of it earlier than men do.

**Q:** Given what we do know about these gender differences and drinking, what would be your best advice to a campus on how to respond to calls for taking gender differences into account in prevention?

**A:** We ought to take advantage of the larger academic community of the campus in terms of academic and cocurricular programs. Campuses are interested in gender now and have been increasingly so in recent years. Many programs involve a focus on gender, such as gender studies and faculty lectures and guest speakers on gender issues. Unfortunately, very little of that interest has been channeled so far into substance abuse. That is still seen as a male concern. Most of the focus has been on the areas of occupations, family, and children—all of which are important issues—or equity in other areas. But one of the fundamental issues with regard to substance use is the gender divide and how it’s experienced. We need to motivate academic communities, deans, and faculties to channel some of the interest, energy, and funds that are going into gender-related topics on campus to the issue of substance abuse.

Campuses should acknowledge that gender sameness and differences exist in alcohol and other drug prevention—just like we find in a lot of other social and political areas—and work from that perspective rather than the assumption that there simply are fundamental differences. The truth is that there are some clear differences and some clear similarities. But we’ve got to start from the perspective that we are open to both possibilities.

***A woman who drinks very heavily has a different set of choices.***