

Friday Night Odysseys: Students' Party Behavior

The behavior of college students on weekend evenings is perhaps one of the most criticized, and least understood parts of college life, not just by faculty, administrators, and parents, but also by the students who experience it weekly. To someone not participating, a quiet, beautiful campus transforms into a loud, messy, and aggressive scene full of alcohol, drugs, sex, overt displays of sexuality and machismo, and other forms of excess that lead to vandalism, fighting, and sexual assault (and sometimes worse). Concerned members of the community (often students themselves) frequently frame the problems of campus party nights as centering on alcohol, and administrators are quick to form coalitions to deal with student alcohol consumption. While concerns about excess alcohol consumption by students are certainly valid, the hype about alcohol often masks other factors that contribute to the problems that arise during weekend nights. A result of this political focus on alcohol is that a great deal of the academic study of college partying (and college life in general) centers solely on alcohol, and ignores the tremendous social forces at work, forces we will examine here.

Sociologically, party nights are quite interesting: hundreds of students of all kinds crowd together in a handful of musically enhanced places, consume huge amounts of a variety of chemicals often to the point of illness, appear to have a wonderful and exciting time, and then all disperse, either to some other gathering or theirs or someone else's room. This pattern of behavior is repeated week after week, every Friday and Saturday

(and sometimes Thursdays), and there are even patterns of repeated behavior within individual nights (drinking celebrations and beer-pong games, for example).

Sociologists call these patterns *social rituals*, and it turns out that students' participation in partying – their excitement, energy, excessive behavior, and pleasure – can be explained by ritual theory.

Party nights are exciting because they are opportunities for students to charge their social batteries by meeting up with numerous people and participating in countless interaction rituals. Alcohol and other chemical highs contribute to students' energy, but are *secondary* to the social high of the night – as students suggest, alcohol acts as a “social lubricant,” and not as the purpose of the adventure. Residential colleges in particular provide such an intimate and small community (in terms of population and space), that students are sure to run into numerous people they know. Party nights should be understood as high-energy and energy-producing *odysseys* – they are *ritual adventures* that groups of students undertake to spend time with others, typically while intoxicated, and frequently with the latent goal of hooking up. The term odyssey is fitting not just for the content – people, alcohol, and often sexual contact – but for its structure as well – *numerous unexpected interaction rituals* that require the student to be socially adroit. When these interactions are successful, and the structure of parties make them very likely to be so, they are emotionally profitable for all involved, which is the simple answer to why students party.

In this paper we will dissect the typical ritual experiences of partying students to reveal what leads students to behave in the ways they do. We will also take the opportunity, when appropriate, to zoom out to discuss larger-scale issues affecting party rituals such as the presence or lack of fraternity/sorority houses and alcohol regulations.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL ANATOMY OF A PARTY NIGHT

Preparation

It is difficult to pinpoint when on a given Friday the odyssey begins, and this gray area will differ widely from student to student: some begin drinking when their last class ends, others don't enter the party mindset until after sundown, and for some the adventure doesn't really begin until they leave their room. Setting aside specifics, most students will have some kind of preparation ritual, which itself will vary widely – applying makeup, using cologne or perfume, changing clothes, or maybe just buying beer downtown. Costume parties are also common: “So you kind of go and just go crazy, like getting dressed up for parties and stuff... Like this past weekend was good girls, bad boys, and I was dressed up like a thug. I'm still having fun with it.” [Dan 02-03] While preparation serves a practical function, it is also a ritual often done in the company (or nearby company) of friends, and will generate excitement and anticipation in and of itself.

Pre-Gaming

Pre-gaming, a term borrowed from sports fandom, marks the formal beginning of

the evening, and necessarily consists of alcohol consumption in smaller (5-20) groups of students. While pre-gaming is “never the main part of an evening” [Jack 01-02], it establishes a common mood amongst the group that will go out together by bringing all the members together physically, and focusing them on a mutual activity – often a drinking game or a game on TV, and sometimes just the group discussion (present regardless). Already, three of the four elements of a social ritual are present: the physical co-presence of members of the group, a mutual focus of attention, and a common mood (fun, excitement, mild intoxication, and also anticipation), and the fourth – sacred objects – may also be present as well, perhaps in the form of a beer pong table or case of beer.

While this activity is emotionally exciting, as Jack pointed out, it is never the main event. Groups of students who just participate in this kind of party typically consider it just hanging out, or having a “chill night.” The energy created in pre-gaming is mild in comparison to that which awaits, primarily because, at this point, the group is relatively small. Note that at this point, we have switched from a discussion of an individual student to that of a group – for most of the evening, the group and not the student is the most significant unit of analysis. There will be notable exceptions to this though.

Going Out

Moving from the pre-gaming site to the main party is itself a part of the ritual – it is the first situation in which members of the group can encounter others and be seen, and

hence has some emotional significance. Running into people along the way, calling up friends to meet, and coordinating the group's entrance to the party are all significant logistical steps to ensure that everyone who should be at the party is there. If it turns out that few people a student or group knows will be at a party, they are unlikely to attend.

We might also point out the significance of the ritual of being *fashionably late* – an interesting phenomenon in itself that essentially amounts to what Goffman has called “role distance.”¹ The student plays the role of the party-goer, but also distances him/herself from the role by attending late, displaying their casual disinterest towards the event, or that they had more important things to do, despite their real feelings and availability. Goffman examined similar behavior:

Goffman cites such observations as children who adopt an attitude of disinterest while riding the merry-go-round, as if to display that they are too old to be engrossed in this “little kids” amusement. The phenomenon is extremely widespread. A major part of the contemporary culture of personal styles, extending at least as far back as the first half of the twentieth century, is the “cool,” ironic, mocking attitude toward social roles... Our modern heroes, both in the entertainment media and everyday life, are those persons who communicate by little gestures and styles that they can stay cool under pressure, aware of the demands of the role, but able to stand back from it and keep it subordinate.²

¹ Collins, Randall. 1988. *Theoretical Sociology*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. p. 255.

² Collins, 1988, 255-256

The centrality of indifference to the appearance of being “cool” is apparent when excited students try to get their friends to leave for a party early, only to be met by jibes of being too eager. The phenomenon of being fashionably late has become so widespread that party-throwers do not expect students to even begin to arrive till at least an hour after the official start time of the party. Some simply roll back the start time of the party to an hour before they are ready, simply to get students to show up at the right time.³ While this phenomenon is not unique to college campuses, it may find particular expressions that are, namely in who is more (or less) fashionably late: An interesting and fun project for a sociology student would be to examine how students’ class years affect the length of time they are fashionably late, to look for the same situation as the “disinterested” older child in Goffman’s study distaining the younger children who were openly enjoying the ride.

The Party

The first major event of the evening can take many forms, depending on what is available, and also on the group’s interests – what matters is that a significant amount of other people are there to interact with. This points to a major conclusion of social ritual theory – that *the content of the ritual does not matter*, just that people are together doing it. In other words, whether the event is a concert, a gathering in a lounge, or massive party in a hall does not matter as long as the event is a ritual, and there are people there to

³ We can speculate on some of the affects of the universality of being fashionably late – namely, that because everyone expects everyone else to appear at least an hour late, those who *then* wish to appear indifferent, need to appear *two* hours late, which then pushes back what is culturally accepted. Is there a limit to how far this can go?

take part in it.⁴

A successful party – one that has enough people to crowd the space⁵ - maintains a high degree of all four elements of ritual solidarity:⁶

1) Physical co-presence.

At parties, people are jammed together in a claustrophobic space, which is typically hot, humid, and dark, amplifying the feeling of proximity to others. Beyond this, though, there are a number of rituals within the party that students undertake to further increase their feeling of co-presence with others.

Greeting rituals almost always involve a physical component – hugging, kissing, shaking hands, high-fives. While these are typically brief, the physicality and intimacy of them is symbolic – they suggest membership in the group and acceptance, and are also, by way of their physicality, energy-producing. This is one reason why students love to see so many people they know on a party night, if only to temporarily greet them – they derive energy from the symbolic greeting interaction, and often only receive diminishing returns with subsequent interactions with the same person. What's more, greeting rituals are typically much more elaborate than farewell rituals. When a student enters a small party for the first time and is a well accepted part of the group, many students will shout

⁴ There are, of course, structural differences to these that may matter. A concert, for example, has an explicit mutual focus of attention, which might increase social energy, but allow less interaction between students than a large party. The point here is that the ritual is significant, not what the ritual is housed within.

⁵ A large space with fifty people will seem far less successful, and will have less of an emotional affect, than a small space with fifty people in it. Dead spaces are like vacuums that suck in emotional energy.

⁶ Collins derived these categories directly from Durkheim in Collins, 1988, p. 193.

and cheer, hand him/her a beer, shake hands and engage in other physical contact, and generally celebrate the student's appearance. Departure rituals are far more subdued, and typically consist of the student saying he/she will see the other's later in the evening, even if such a promise is clearly empty. Students seem to derive far more energy to greeting rituals than departure rituals, likely because greeting rituals attempt to rapidly incorporate the entering student into the common mood, and also symbolically suggest that this student belongs, and that the greeters have the authority to greet and welcome. We will return to these ideas later.

Dancing is an obvious mechanism for increasing proximity, and is a legitimate way for students to be closer to each other, with various degrees of touching and intimacy that signal interest and intentions. A pair of students might dance far apart, with only their body alignment and occasional met stare signaling that they are dancing together, or a pair might "grind," pressing themselves against each other – two opposite ends of the spectrum of dancing behavior, that send two different signals (both to the other dancer, and to all the others nearby). Dancing, as one of few legitimate forms of touching between non-partnered individuals, plays an important role as an initial gateway to the hook-up, precisely because of the increased (and exclusive) co-presence combined with the symbolic gestures of proximity and touching.⁷

Dancing does not occur in a vacuum – of course, it requires music, *loud* music in the case of college parties, the rhythm of which is kept by the dancers. Setting aside the

⁷ Successful execution of the dancing ritual can lead to increased proximity – petting, making out, etc. . . – which can in turn lead to other sexual rituals and sex itself. For the best exposition of this see: Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 224-257.

other functions of party music (which we will discuss later), the rhythm of the song and the dancers creates a kind of synchronization between everyone at the party.

Interestingly, it seems that in everyday interactions, people maintain a “rhythmic synchronization” with each other – whether in talking, gesturing, walking, or doing anything with others, the interaction maintains a certain beat or vibration, though in everyday life it is typically too fast or subtle to be noticed. Dancing to music, especially music with a heavy beat (not surprisingly, called “dance music”) creates a universal rhythm to which people synch their own movements and gyrations. While this kind of rhythmic synchronization is more conscious, it relies upon the same mechanism, for the same affect: “synchronization is a major source of pleasure in social interaction,”⁸ Collins suggests. This places dancing beyond a simple mechanism to increase co-presence – it adds that the quality of the dancing – keeping to a beat – is also important, and is itself a kind of micro-ritual.

Various other activities (planned or impromptu) can serve the purpose of decreasing distance between individuals – games like twister, drinking rituals like beer pong and kings, are all examples of games that rely on the physical proximity of participants, and often increase their rate of touching and degree of closeness, and hence, emotional excitement.

We should note that the emotional energy created by proximity to others is not necessarily conscious – people do not navigate the social world by actively thinking about every social gesture or movement that the people around them make. People

⁸ Collins, 1988, p. 203.

certainly do become conscious of the physical symbols others are presenting, especially of such a symbol includes unwanted contact – a drunk student whom you have no interest in grabs your hand, someone cuts in on your dance with a friend, etc.

2) Mutual Focus of Attention

Unlike many common rituals of modern society such as religious ceremonies, sports events, and concerts, parties do not have a central, universal focus of attention. There is no one thing that commands the attention of the people at the party – some groups of students may be chatting in a corner, a few couples are making out in the hall, many people are dancing in pairs or groups, some students are waiting in line for beer, others are playing drinking games. We might speculate that music, which is ever-present at parties, is the mutual focus of attention. However, as we have seen, music is a means to achieve rhythmic synchronization through dancing, and really it is more often the dancing partner who is the focus of a student's attention.

Despite not having a mutual focus of attention, parties are fabulously successful at creating solidarity, intimacy, and high degrees of emotional energy. We might speculate that parties provide a high-energy setting into which groups can enter, to themselves become the focus of attention. In other words, a group (perhaps two people dancing, or perhaps a gathering of friends) create their own interaction ritual within the setting of the party. We see evidence of this when we see patterns of group formation within parties.

Parties also provide a large amount of people, many of whom a given student

knows. Parties allow a student to wander from group to group, person to person, engaging in greeting rituals and small talk, or maybe more significant rituals like dancing or playing a game. While the group is a significant unit of analysis at parties, so too is the individual, as it is he or she that can navigate the party in search of friends, acquaintances, or just familiar faces to greet and create ritual energy. Parties provide a common venue for *cosmopolitan* behavior – wandering from group to group, and entering and exiting groups through various rituals, all of which generate energy (if the interactions are at all positive). To use a Goffmanian term, parties allow students to switch rapidly between *frames* – different social realities that are created by different groups. A student may enter a party with friends he lives with (a kind of “core” group), wander around and meet up with a girl who is with her sorority friends, leave that group and find a group of friends with whom he does volunteer work, leave that group and run into two friends from class and make small talk, go to the bathroom and run into a familiar face (though he can’t place the name) and engage in awkward, though amiable chit chat, and then search out his original group of friends, or what remains of the group after they have engaged in their own wandering.

We can understand all of this kind of behavior as itself a kind of cosmopolitan ritual – switching between groups (and hence, focuses of attention), engaging in small ritual interactions to enter and leave the group, and moving on to another. Students at parties are like hummingbirds dipping their beaks in a variety of flowers, if only for a brief moment.

3) Common Emotional Mood

The common emotional mood of ritual participants is both a cause and effect of the ritual, and in parties, a common mood is initially achieved through the previous preparation and pre-gaming rituals detailed above. Further, a general degree of intoxication amongst party members probably helps create a common mood, or at least indicate the general atmosphere of the party to newcomers. The anticipation of the weekend, and the expectation that this night will be as exciting and stimulating as the last party night, also stabilize the mood of the group.

It is important to note that the common emotional mood does not necessarily persist throughout the night. Some groups may become more excited, and some less so, for the various reasons we have and will outline. The more common the mood at the beginning of the party, however, the more likely it is to succeed for everyone.

4) Sacred objects

The sacred objects of rituals identify members and non-members, and provide the group with the means to create exclusivity and boundaries. The sacred objects of parties, as in much of modern society, are people and behaviors: dancing, keeping a beat, singing the words of a well known song, appearing socially busy, appearing to have fun, wearing appropriate clothes, wearing costumes (to costume parties), holding a beer, are in themselves all symbols of membership. Not exhibiting this kind of behavior marks one as an outsider: a loser, poser, wannabe, etc. The intensity of violation will depend on the context (who is throwing the party, the number of other people exhibiting “proper”

symbolic behavior), as well as the type of violation. For example, pulling out a text book and studying in the middle of the dance floor would be an extreme violation, via the presentation of a symbolic object that is anathema to the party ritual, and would likely provoke an extremely negative reaction. The sacred objects of the party night are embedded in the students themselves, in their behavior and composure, in what they are and are not doing.

Students who do not drink, regularly and often intensely sense their violation of one of the basic sacred objects of the party ritual. Teetotaler students seem to adapt to the issue, and minimize their feeling of alienation, but still recognize that their behavior is significantly different than the mainstream:

I don't drink or smoke or do all that, it's not that I feel left out because I don't need to do all that to have fun, but I don't think I have to resort to that to just fit in. I think that's what the general consensus here is, to just drink, drink, drink, and that's not me. That's how I think. [John 01-02]

The same student made this comment the next year:

I mean I'm not really, I don't drink at all, don't smoke, none of that stuff. So I mean I know a lot of students who are into that, but I'm not, so I kind of just levitate. That doesn't really, you know, segregate me from like,

you know, meeting different people, but I just don't like to associate myself with people who do that or those kinds of activities. [John 02-03]

Another student stated:

I think what kind of disappointed me was probably social life at Hamilton, which is very much the same, and like a lot of drinking, and I personally don't drink. It's like if you don't drink, it's very limiting. [Anne 01-02]

Drinking is, hence, one of the strongest symbols of the party night, though it is important to note that it does not seem that *being drunk* is an important symbol (indeed, even amongst drinking students, being too drunk is a negative thing), just that participating in the consumption of alcohol is significant.⁹

The party is a carefully constructed ritual that contains numerous smaller rituals with great symbolic import. A significant part of the larger ritual for individual students is a kind of cosmopolitan ramble – wandering from group to group, participating in short greeting and departing rituals, sometimes lingering if the interaction is energetic and positive, and leaving when it is not. While a student rarely plans out their actions ahead of time, or even knows who will be there for them to run into, the anticipation and adventurous excitement over this is itself an element of the ritual, and students have carefully constructed party personas that allow them to deal with whomever they may run into.

⁹ This is likely one of the main reasons non-alcoholic beer exists.

Post-Party

Leaving a party is far less celebrated than entering one, for reasons already stated. Often, students will not go out of their way to find and bid farewell to students outside of their immediate group, not just because departure signals a mild rejection of the party (and hence has only brief and straightforward rituals surrounding it), but also simply because the majority of a given student's interactions with others at a party are superficial, in the sense that partying students are not seeking meaningful conversation, but energetic interaction, something that departure rituals lack.

After the departure rituals (or lack thereof), there are a variety of paths students take after the main event: some go home, some go home with someone else, some join a group or find their initial group and move on to another event. For the sake of example, let us assume our group reassembles and moves on to a campus late-night diner.

The diner provides students with another public place to continue interactions within the group, and between group members and outsiders, and simply to watch other students enter and leave. It also allows groups to plan what they want to do next, to call and coordinate with other students, to hear about other parties and gatherings, and assess the group's losses (students who are too drunk to do anything but sleep, students who leave to hook up with someone, etc.). Additionally, food can work to sober students up, either so that they can then drink more, or so they don't go to bed completely drunk.

By this point in the night, some students might find they have exhausted their supply of friends and acquaintances with whom to run into, and hence receive diminishing returns on the emotional energy they receive from being out and about. When students and groups decide to call it a night, it is most likely because of these diminishing emotional returns (which are magnified by the fact that, at this point, *other* groups have decided to go home as well, further decreasing interactions, and hence emotional energy). Over-consumption of alcohol may certainly be an important factor in play as well, though it is not uncommon to see extremely intoxicated individuals, still on social highs, abounding with physical energy, which suggests that, again, the degree of intoxication is not always sole determinant of behavior.

STRUCTURE OF THE EVENING ODYSSEY

Having examined the specific interaction rituals of the party night, we should zoom out and examine the larger structure of the evening's adventures.

As we have stated, the main component of the party night is *other students*. However, recreating with the same small group of students one lives with – six or seven immediate friends – does not make a party night. In Jack's words: "I don't see too much of a point [of] just getting drunk and then sitting in a room. I could do that sober. When I get drunk, I like to do things." ["Jack" 01-02] A successful weekend evening is one in which a student interacts with dozens, maybe even hundreds of his/her peers, if only for a brief time. The model of the social butterfly we presented when discussing the inner

workings of parties applies equally as well to the larger structure of the odyssey. Students roam from place to place and group to group, not exactly knowing what to expect, which is part of the adventure ritual itself, contributing to the excitement. As every other student out that night is doing the same thing, and as every student knows the rituals of party culture, this common mood allows (even requires) energetic interaction. College campus' weekend cultures are precisely shaped so as to allow and encourage this behavior.¹⁰ On the smaller scale, parties are events structured by students, and hence by the norms of party culture, that make it easy for students to charge their social batteries through interaction: put lots of students, most of whom know each other, in a smaller room than can accommodate them, turn off most of the lights, add music so that the students have something to move in synch to, add alcohol to lower inhibitions and create a common mood, and the students will naturally do the rest. It is little wonder, given the intensity of these events, that students' emotions rise to such levels of intensity.

¹⁰ Much of this applies to residential colleges in general, regardless of the time of day or day of the week. Intimacy and community arise naturally, and the minute-to-minute likelihood of running into someone you know is extremely high, due not only to the small campus, but to the fact that students move in patterns—they eat in the same places, walk on the same paths, go into shared buildings. On weekends, the space available for activity is reduced (as academic buildings are eliminated from the picture), further increasing the likelihood of interaction.