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Special Topics : Underage/College Drinking : Henry Wechsler

AUTHOR COMMENTARIES - From Special Topics

Underage/College Drinking - November 2008

Interview Date: November 2008



Henry Wechsler

From the Special Topic of **Underage/College Drinking**

According to our analysis of underage/college drinking research over the past decade, the scientist whose work ranks at #1 by total citations is Dr. Henry Wechsler, based on 65 papers cited a total of 2,961 times. A dozen of these papers are among the top 20 papers published in the past decade and the past two years.

*In **Essential Science Indicators**SM from **Thomson Reuters**, Dr. Wechsler's work is in the top 1% in the field of Social Sciences. He has also been named a **Highly Cited Researcher** in this field.*

Dr. Wechsler is a Lecturer in the Department of Society, Human Development, and Health at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the principal investigator of the School's College Alcohol Study (CAS) during its existence. In the interview below, he talks with ScienceWatch.com about his highly cited work.

SW: Would you tell us a bit about your educational background and research experiences?

I received a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Harvard University. My interest has always focused on social factors in deviant or self-destructive behavior. After a few years of research on mental health, I decided to work in a broader area—public health. I wanted to concentrate my work on youth, since the ability to change maladaptive behaviors among young people offered the greatest benefit to society.

SW: What influenced your focus on college drinking?

In the late 1960s I conducted studies of students in middle schools and high schools, and despite the focus at that time on a drug "epidemic," I found that alcohol was by far the drug of choice. College students offered a population eager to be surveyed, and New England was a center of college life. This enabled me to conduct several statewide and regional studies. For me, alcohol use presented an intriguing topic because it was most likely influenced by a variety of factors: genetic and familial, psychological, economic, legal and political, and educational and environmental.

SW: One of your big projects is the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (CAS). Would you talk a bit about this project: how it was conceived, how it was carried out, and what you've found over the years?

After studying colleges in New England and Massachusetts and finding that heavy

"Binge drinking produces problems for the drinker and second-hand effects for classmates as well as residents in the neighborhoods adjoining the college."

drinking was a part of college life, I wanted to conduct a survey in a large representative national sample of colleges. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation offered me that opportunity by funding the first CAS survey, and three more after that over a period of over 12 years. The ensuing rich data set produced through the surveys on over 50,000 students at 120 colleges in 40 states allowed me to obtain a picture of the drinking behaviors at American four-year colleges and universities, and to publish over 80 articles in peer-reviewed journals in fields ranging from psychology, public health, medicine, sociology, economics, and education. I have been able to disseminate these findings beyond the scientific community to educators, policymakers, and legislators.

The findings described the type of students most likely to binge drink, the centers of binge drinking at colleges, the type of schools with the most binge drinking, and the factors in communities that fostered heavy drinking. Many of my publications focused on the contribution of the environment to this form of drinking. The alcohol environment includes the density of alcohol outlets, the low prices and marketing practices, and the alcohol policies and laws in the area where the schools are located.

SW: What is the current trend for college drinking—is it still on the rise?

Heavy alcohol use has been present at colleges since Colonial days. It remains so. During the period of the College Alcohol Study, binge drinking has remained at a remarkably consistent 44% overall, and has been level at the 119 participating colleges, where it ranges from 1% to almost 80%. There were two opposite trends during that time: a rise in abstention, and a rise in some more extreme forms of drinking.

SW: You've been focusing on trends in college drinking for much longer than the recent decade covered in our analysis. Are there any overall trends, and are you optimistic or pessimistic with regard to reducing the use of illicit substances on college campuses?

When I look at the long-term drop in tobacco use, particularly in some states, I am optimistic about what might happen if colleges address binge drinking firmly and consistently. Look at what has happened to tobacco use over the same period of time. Higher prices through taxation, enforced smoke-free areas, and media-based educational programs have helped to change attitudes and behavior.

SW: What prevention/deterrence methods do you feel do the most good in reducing alcohol consumption on college campuses?

"Heavy alcohol use has been present at colleges since Colonial days"

Better town-gown cooperation is needed. Colleges can not do it alone. Towns and cities need to monitor and regulate the alcohol environment that surrounds most colleges. Limiting new alcohol licenses, curbing low-price specials and "happy hours," and putting in place comprehensive policies and regulations that are enforced will help to reduce the harms created by binge drinking. Colleges need to get rid of their old drinking traditions, control their fraternities and sororities, and divorce their athletic programs from financial arrangements with the alcohol industry.

SW: What would you like the "take-away lesson" about your research to be?

Binge drinking produces problems for the drinker and second-hand effects for classmates as well as residents in the neighborhoods adjoining the college. It is not only the "alcoholic" whose drinking produces these problems. Students who drink at the 5/4 level defining binge drinking in the CAS (five or more drinks in a row at least once in the past two weeks for men, and four drinks for women) account for most of the alcohol-related problems and second-hand effects on campus. ■

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Henry Wechsler's current most-cited paper in *Essential Science Indicators*, with 320 cites:

Wechsler H, *et al.*, "College binge drinking during the 1990s: A continuing problem—results of the Harvard School of Public Health 1999 College Alcohol Study," *J. Amer. Coll. Health* 48(5): 199-210, March 2000. Source: *Essential Science Indicators* from Thomson Reuters.

Additional Information:

Henry Wechsler is featured in ISIHighlyCited.com.

Henry Wechsler was featured in a Research Front Map on "College Student Drinking" from the field of Psychiatry/Psychology that was selected for mapping from the list of Fast Moving Fronts for March 2008.

Keywords: social factors, deviant behavior, self-destructive behavior, alcohol, college students, Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Survey, drinking behaviors, alcohol environment, binge drinking, town-gown cooperation.

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