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Drinking During a Pandemic: Perceptions of Alcohol Use Among Restaurant Workers

By:

Alexandria Spann

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Faculty Advisor: Michael Dietler

Preceptor: Mary Elena Wilhoit

Abstract

Restaurant workers have higher rates of “heavy drinking” than most occupational groups. However, little is known about how their drinking behaviors may have transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the unique challenges they have faced as a population during this time. An exploration of restaurant workers’ own perceptions of their alcohol consumption patterns prior to and during the pandemic can provide important insights into how they may have been coping with the added stress of the pandemic. This paper examines this question as well as the social and cultural factors of working in a restaurant environment that can lead to increased alcohol consumption for those in the service industry and the symbolic load alcohol holds for those in restaurant work communities. Drawing from the notion of alcohol as “embodied material culture” as well as other ethnographic studies, this paper explores the ways in which alcohol constructs social networks and beliefs around the substance for restaurant workers. This research also examines the transformation of restaurant workers’ drinking rituals since the start of the pandemic. Additionally, this research shows that the social meaning surrounding alcohol use in restaurant work communities is that it is a way to facilitate bonds between co-workers and cope with stressful factors surrounding restaurant work as well as the new challenges that have impacted restaurant workers since the pandemic began (e.g. unemployment, understaffing, enforcement of CDC restrictions related to COVID-19). Findings from this research suggest an increase in restaurant workers’ alcohol use during the pandemic due to the many challenges restaurant workers faced during this time and, especially, because of the drinking culture in restaurant communities where the norm is to drink “heavily” and regularly, resulting in an ambivalent attitude towards excessive alcohol use.

Introduction

Recent studies demonstrate an increase in alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic. Health experts are especially concerned about this trend for populations that were already vulnerable to excessive drinking (Pollard et al. 2020, Sugarman & Greenfield 2020, Weerakoon et al. 2020). Historically, food service workers had some of the highest rates of heavy drinking and are the most at risk for substance use disorders (Moore et al. 2009, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration 2015). Given the stress of the pandemic for restaurant workers generally, this study examines restaurant workers' own perceptions of their alcohol use during the pandemic and how those compare to their drinking habits prior to it.

Although the pandemic will presumably end, individuals that have formed new drinking habits may experience long-term health effects. Many restaurant workers also have minimal healthcare and thus may be less likely to seek or receive treatment in the future if negative health effects occur due to excessive drinking (Strebig 2019). This work is needed to better inform public health officials and future intervention efforts to contextualize restaurant workers' patterns of drinking and their views regarding heavy drinking (Duke et al., 1). Statistics on excessive drinking do not suffice in explaining why and how this population is coping with the changes the pandemic has presented, especially in terms of alcohol use. Given the limited ethnographic research on this population, their large representation in the United States workforce, and the drastic changes they are experiencing in their work and social life, it is important to understand the impact a pandemic like COVID-19 has had on their drinking patterns.

To better understand the ways in which restaurant workers were drinking prior to the pandemic, it is important to note Rachel Doern and Steven Kates (1998) work on the social meaning of alcohol consumption among restaurant workers. The authors emphasize the

significant role drinking has in creating bonds for employees in restaurant work environments. They conclude that the norms and social pressures in the restaurant work environment around drinking with coworkers work to produce social cohesion for those who choose to drink, while creating social distance for those abstaining from alcohol use. Nonetheless, the authors claim that alcohol consumption among restaurant workers “facilitates both functional and dysfunctional outcomes such as staff communication, conformity to group norms, the promotion of drug enhanced relationships and experiences, and the potential (ab)use of alcohol” (Doern and Kates, "The Social Meanings of Drinking: Strengthening the Social Bonds of Restaurant Employees"). This work highlights the large role alcohol use plays in structuring the interactions between restaurant employees and the positive and negative aspects it can have in the work environment.

Michael Duke’s (2013) studies shed more light on the kinds of bonds, norms, and interactions among restaurant workers in relation to their drinking patterns and the need for future interventions to target these workers. He found that restaurant workers had different drinking styles depending on their occupational position within the restaurant and concluded that the drinking cliques within a restaurant act as bonding networks which provide “group fellowship and solidarity, but at the expense of excluding those who work in a different part of the restaurant” (Duke et al., 10). That is, Duke argues for the importance and power of social networks in shaping drinking patterns for restaurant workers. Further, the kinds of bonds or connections restaurant workers have are due to their similar backgrounds, which work to form and maintain workers’ distinct drinking networks. The tendency of workers to remain in a certain social grouping was due to their position in the front (e.g. servers, hosts) or back-of-the-house (e.g. kitchen staff) (Duke et al., 10). Duke and Moore (2012) also found that restaurant workers often drink before or after work and that policies against pre-work drinks were not effective.

While this literature points to some of the functions of alcohol use for restaurant workers, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how those, as well as the meaning of alcohol, are constructed for these employees. For this paper, I am drawing from Michael Dietler's (2006) notion of alcohol as "embodied material culture." His examination of alcohol as "embodied material culture" disallows reducing it to simply a chemical substance and suggests that alcohol use is neither merely an expression or reflection of cultural identity. Alcohol use plays an active role in constructions of identity as well as symbolic significance for the ways those identities are "embodied, performed, and transformed." I will use this notion here to think through the ways in which alcohol constructs social networks for restaurant workers and the ways those influence drinking behaviors. In addition, I will examine the meanings alcohol has for restaurant workers to better understand how the effects of alcohol may be embodied or enacted.

Other ethnographic research of note regarding alcohol's meaning for a better understanding of how the effects of alcohol may be embodied or enacted is Dwight Heath's (1958) work with the Camba of Eastern Bolivia. This work demonstrated the large role cultural beliefs play in shaping drinking behaviors and the findings show that although participants drank heavily, they did not exhibit the "aggression, boisterousness, or clowning as seen in other cultures with heavy drinking" (Glasser, 18). Heath concluded that an understanding of culturally constituted beliefs about the effects of alcohol is key in determining the effects of heavy drinking (Singer 2012). In addition, Craig MacAndrew and Robert Edgerton's (2003[1969]) cross-cultural study of drinking behavior demonstrated that the ways people act when drinking to intoxication

is contingent on how they learned to drink and that drinking is socially integrative in some cultures but produces “changes for the worst” in others (Glasser, 17). These studies suggest that the meaning alcohol has to a particular group (e.g. viewing alcohol as an intoxicant, food, medicine, or as having sacred/religious significance, etc.) impacts not only the ways in which people drink, but also their behavior while intoxicated. That is, this research shows that the ways people perceive, interpret, and react to physiological stimuli are culturally learned and embodied behaviors (Dietler 2006).

Therefore, this paper explores restaurant workers’ own perceptions of their alcohol use with a commitment to the idea that drinking alcohol is both a physical and cultural act. That is, through a theoretical lens which rejects the reductionist approach of alcohol consumption as simply a response to physiological stimuli (Dietler 2006). Thus, my aim is to highlight the social and cultural factors of working in a restaurant environment that can lead to increased alcohol consumption for those in the service industry and the symbolic load alcohol holds for those in restaurant work communities. In addition, I will examine the ways in which restaurant workers’ drinking rituals have transformed during the pandemic. This paper draws from survey responses from restaurant workers, however, mostly from four in-depth interviews I conducted with respondents who worked in a restaurant at some point during the pandemic. Further, I draw from the ethnographic studies cited above to highlight the parallels in those works with the narratives from interviewees about the “drinking culture” of a restaurant, especially regarding the social pressures, norms, and bonds that arise within restaurant work communities. Finally, I will argue that all of my respondents reported an increase in their alcohol use during the pandemic due to the many challenges restaurant workers faced during this time and, especially, because of the

drinking culture in restaurant communities where the norm is to drink “heavily” and regularly, resulting in an ambivalent attitude towards excessive alcohol use. That is, the social meaning surrounding alcohol use based on findings from this research is that it is a form of community-building between co-workers and way of coping with stressful factors that have impacted restaurant workers since the pandemic began (e.g. unemployment, understaffing, enforcement of CDC restrictions related to COVID-19). Further, respondents increasingly held varying beliefs about what constitutes excessive drinking, which had an impact on their drinking behaviors during the pandemic.

Methods, Positionality, and Respondents

Surveys included 6 questions, 5 of which were short answer responses regarding individual drinking patterns before and during the pandemic as well as some of the challenges of being a restaurant worker during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys were distributed via messaging on social media platforms and sent to acquaintances with whom I worked with in restaurants previously. Survey respondents ranged in age from 18-42 and there were 15 responses in total. All respondents in surveys and interviews worked in a restaurant at some point during the pandemic. Interviews were conducted over the phone and audio recorded with respondents’ permission. For the purposes of confidentiality, all interviewees’ names have been changed for this study.

Before turning to a more thorough analysis of my interviews with my respondents, it is important to note my positionality and the nature of our relationships. After working for years in various restaurants in Memphis, TN, I was hired as a server at my most recent and last restaurant job. It was at a locally-owned pizza restaurant that was a middle ground between fine-dining and fast-food in the heart of Midtown. As employees, we were allowed shift meals and beers, which

was a benefit I never had in previous restaurants. There were few, if any, dress codes and most of the employees were between the ages of twenty to thirty years old. This is where I met my first respondent and dear friend, Jess. As Jess described it in our interview, the restaurant had a pretty “lax” (relaxed) work environment. All of the servers, except for one individual, were those who identified as women. The back of the house mostly consisted of all of those who identified as men, except for Jess.

We did not become close friends until we regularly began sharing our shift beers with one another and going to the bar across the street after work to gripe about the many frustrations of work that day. Once I began working in the restaurant full time and Jess became a server, we grew even closer as friends. Before I knew it, we were sharing more about our lives with each other that were not related to the restaurant, namely the similar traumatic experiences we had endured over the years, and spending time with each other on our days off from work. I quit working at the restaurant a few years ago, however, Jess and I remain close friends, talking on the phone regularly and venting to each other about the new frustrations we are now encountering.

Now, a little bit of context about Jess. She is twenty five years old and still lives in Memphis, TN. Jess’ first job was in a restaurant and she was hired when she was sixteen years old. It was the same restaurant from which I met her, however, at a different location. She was transferred to the location where we met a few years later. She worked in a restaurant for almost nine years before quitting last year around the beginning of the pandemic. Her main reason for leaving the restaurant was due to management’s lack of care or enforcement of safety measures for employees, not to mention the reduced work hours and increased stress that was put on employees. Jess’ fiance has an auto-immune disease related to his lungs, so Jess felt it was

necessary for both of their health to quit her job at the restaurant. Jess was unemployed for about a year. Recently, however, she was hired at a retail store where two other previous co-workers are also employed.

I also worked with Thomas, my second respondent, at the same restaurant where I met Jess and he worked in the kitchen. He is twenty three years old and still works at the same restaurant, although he left the job momentarily due to his frustration with management's response to the pandemic and lack of stable income. He has, similar to Jess, worked in the restaurant industry for about ten years. We were good friends while I worked in the restaurant, however, have not kept in touch as much as Jess and I have. He is a shy, very polite and hard-working person, who rarely went out drinking with other co-workers but would usually drink his shift beers with us. He was raised in a very Christian household and married very young, at the age of twenty one, to his high school sweetheart.

My other two respondents were people I had met through mutual social networks, however, we had no communication with one another until our interviews. Bea is twenty one years old and worked in a relatively up-scale restaurant in downtown Memphis. She worked in management of the restaurant, however, left the job towards the beginning of the pandemic due to lack of staffing and increased stress put on her to keep up with and enforce changing CDC guidelines. She is now employed at a retail store. She described herself as "not much of a drinker" but that she had drunk the most that she ever had during the pandemic. Carrie, on the other hand, is a twenty one year old server at a restaurant in east Memphis that sells Asian food, which she described as a step up from her previous restaurant jobs that were in fast-food. She began working at her current job recently, around a few months ago. Both Bea and Carrie have worked in the industry for much less time than Jess and Thomas, around four years.

Drinking on the Job: Alcohol in the Restaurant Work Environment

Before discussing how restaurant workers may have been drinking during the pandemic, it is important to begin by detailing how my informants described their drinking habits and work environment prior to its start. I began each interview by asking my respondents about their overall experience of working in a restaurant. All of my respondents described it as “stressful,” “fast-paced,” and “physically and mentally taxing.” For Jess, however, the conversation quickly turned to one about alcohol. Jess pointed out that even when she was sixteen, she was allowed to have her shift beers and that, as a minor, she, as well as co-workers, never saw that as an “issue.” She began to question whether or not her views on alcohol would be different if she was not in “that kind of environment” at such a young age. I then asked her about what she liked and disliked about working in a restaurant. She told me she liked the flexibility of the work schedule and the “free food” and “alcohol is nice.” However, she had much more to say about what she did not like about it, namely, the “negativity that comes with it.”

This portion of our conversation then turned to alcohol or other drug use in the workplace and the consequences it had on her experience of the overall work environment. I asked her to elaborate on the “negativity” she was referring to, to which she responded:

People are stressed and hot and hungry and they have like other shit going on. Like, they're hungover everyday, like, no one wants to be around those people, like, even (inaudible) percent of the time and like, you're just constantly around people that are fuckin' pissed off and hungry or just tired, over-worked, shit-faced, or hungover, or like strung-out. So, like, it's a pretty negative environment, pretty toxic.

She went on to say that the restaurant environment encourages the formation of “negative habits” and that almost everyone she worked with had “some kind of substance abuse issue.” In addition, Jess pointed out some of the reasons this may be the case, such as the lack of drug testing and

that “as long as you’re capable of doing the job you’re assigned to do,” then “no one is gonna fire you for it.”

Indeed, all of my respondents, without being asked directly, brought up being intoxicated while working at some point in our interview and management’s tolerance of it. Bea, although she did not partake, allowed employees in the kitchen to drink while cleaning the restaurant as long as they brought their own alcohol and were able to complete their job duties. Thomas also recalled that while he did not actively drink while working, he would often come into work highly intoxicated and knew other co-workers who would drink their shift beers while working. Additionally, Carrie discussed that many workers would come back from break “obviously intoxicated” but that as long as the employee was able to “do their job” that they would not be penalized for it. She also relayed to me that on particularly stressful shifts, management allowed employees to take shots so they could “deal with employees” better. However, like Thomas and Jess also discussed, there was rarely any punishment for drinking while working and that the worst that usually happens to an employee who is heavily intoxicated is that they are required to take a break (anywhere from 5-30 minutes) and return to work.

Jess recalled an instance of management’s response to her when she was caught drinking while working. Her manager simply told her, “Don’t ever let me catch you again. I don’t care if you drink at work, but I don’t want to see it.” To which she just said “okay,” poured the beer out, and then “ten minutes later got another one,” this time pouring it in an inconspicuous (brown) cup. I, too, remember how normalized it was to be intoxicated while working and management’s tolerance of it within the restaurant where Jess, Thomas, and I worked. In fact, it wasn’t until I reflected on my conversation with Jess that I realized how much I was drinking while working, especially during a double shift or after a particularly gruelling work day. For instance, I

remember drinking shift beers quickly with other co-workers during our break between the first and second shift, often sitting next to or with management, before returning to work.

Additionally, we had a drinking ritual which was called “power hour” where employees could begin having their shift beers one hour before closing as long as we had the drink in an inconspicuous cup. Jess also discussed “power hour” in her description of a typical work day, where you “have a beer while you do your closing side work, then you clock out, stay at work, and have four more beers, ‘cause you can, nobody’s counting them.”

My interlocutors’ responses share some similarities to the findings of Roland Moore and Michael Duke’s (2012) mixed method study regarding restaurant workers’ norms around alcohol use during and after work hours. Moore et al. found that restaurant workers often drink before or after work and that policies against pre-work drinks were not effective. However, their respondents mostly reported that they did not drink *while* working, but that being hungover during work hours was the norm. So, the responses I received from my interviewees aligned with this study in the sense that many reported returning to work intoxicated or drinking afterwards. Conversely, my interviews shed more light on management’s tolerance of intoxication while working and how common intoxication while working is at my respondents’ respective restaurants.

After-Work Drinking Rituals Before COVID-19 and the Restaurant “Work Family”

In terms of what a typical night drinking *after* work was like before the pandemic began, there was some variation in my interviewees’ responses. However, they mostly described them similarly, stating that by closing time many employees are already somewhat intoxicated and that co-workers usually drink together afterwards at a bar nearby the restaurant. For instance, Jess responded that by closing time, everyone is tired, “pissed off, and probably already half-way

drunk.” Co-workers sit together and drink more shift beers until everyone is finished working. Then, they would go to the bar across the street and “try to forget about how shitty the night was by like (laughs) complaining about it” to other co-workers and “trying to put the whole night together one customer at a time over like ten drinks.” If it was after a particularly difficult shift, Jess told me she would take shots with other co-workers followed by more beer.

Thomas also described drinking with co-workers after shifts in a similar manner, however, as previously stated, he usually would not go to the bar across the street afterwards. He enjoyed drinking his shift beers with co-workers, though, and explained that the main reason he would stay to drink them after work was because it was the only time he felt like he could be social with others. As I also stated, Thomas was very shy and he told me drinking made him feel like he “fit in” more and “loosened” him up so he was able to be more social. Carrie also stated that drinking with co-workers after a shift allowed everyone to “loosen up” and was an important ritual so that she and other co-workers could vent about the gruelling work day. Although Bea did not participate in drinking much let alone with other workers, she still conveyed to me that she knew co-workers would drink together almost nightly after shifts and that even though she was always invited by others she usually denied the invitation.

Bea’s positionality as a manager and someone who does not partake in drinking rituals with co-workers highlights some common themes in Michael Duke’s (2013) study regarding the influence job position in the restaurant has on the social networks and drinking patterns among restaurant workers. He found that restaurant workers had different drinking styles depending on their occupational position within the restaurant and concluded that the drinking cliques within a restaurant act as bonding networks which provide “group fellowship and solidarity, but at the expense of excluding those who work in a different part of the restaurant” (Duke et al., 10). That

is, Duke argues for the importance and power of social networks in shaping drinking patterns for restaurant workers. Further, the kinds of bonds or connections restaurant workers have are due to their similar backgrounds, which work to form and maintain workers' distinct drinking networks. The tendency of workers to remain in a certain social grouping was due to their position in the front (e.g. servers, hosts) or back-of-the-house (e.g. kitchen staff). Perhaps, then, because of Bea's job position as a manager and disinterest in drinking, she had different social networks or background that did not encourage the same kinds of drinking behaviors as my other informants.

Drinking rituals, such as having shift beers or spending time with others after work, play a crucial role in bond formation and social networks within the restaurant work environment (Duke et al. 2013). I asked each informant what they thought the purpose of drinking after work together was. Jess highlighted the ways in which her participation in drinking rituals with other co-workers allowed for a sense of "family" and included some of the other reasons she grew so close with those she worked with. She described restaurant work as outright "abuse" both by customers and management and that the time spent with co-workers gave them "a kind of trauma bond." Jess also stressed to me that one of the main factors of why restaurant workers spend a great deal of time together is due to their work schedule, especially for those who work night shifts. As she stated:

You're, like, practically getting abused every single day, but with these same people. So, it's nice to, like, have somebody that's gonna be awake and like always down to drink with you and it's nice to have a place to, where, like, you can go to where you know you will know people when you get there.

I then asked Jess if she would tell me a story about a specific time where she felt like she was a part of the restaurant "family." Jess then detailed her first time being allowed to have a shift beer while she was still a minor because of her diligent work during a busy shift. At that time, another server acknowledged this, told her she was "cool" to have a beer and to just let them know when

she wanted one so she could pour it for her. At this time, Jess felt that others were beginning to accept her more in the restaurant because of this.

Other ethnographic studies also point out this “family” aspect in restaurants and the importance of social networks within restaurant communities in shaping drinking behaviors (Duke et al., 2013). In Rachael Doern and Steven Kate’s work with restaurant workers, they, too, found that drinking after hours with co-workers plays an important (if not necessary) role in an individual’s socialization into the work environment. In addition to their financial needs, restaurant work fulfilled workers’ social needs, including friendship and a sense of community among employees (Doern and Kates, "The Social Meanings of Drinking: Strengthening the Social Bonds of Restaurant Employees"). Thus, drinking and spending time together outside of the workplace maintained the cohesion of the “work family.”

Carrie’s responses also reflect Doern and Kate’s findings regarding the “family” aspect among restaurant workers and the important role drinking plays in an employee’s socialization within the work environment. Upon completing her first shift a few months ago, Carrie discussed how “welcoming” her co-workers were, stating that they are her best friends now. She also described her introduction into their drinking rituals and habits, stating that her first night drinking after work went accordingly:

As soon as the last customer is [was] out, we’re probably already trying to like, not steal shots, but like, you know, finish off the alcohol that probably nobody would notice and then we’ll go out to a bar and we’ll like--they [co-workers] were already like well known at the bar, so when I showed up, it was very like fun and just like, they were willing to get me shots. They were like giving me triple shots and like everything just ‘cause they could and I was like “Oh? So y’all live like this.” [laughs]

Carrie also told me a story about another drinking occasion with co-workers where she felt like she was “part of the family.” She explained that at her co-workers’ party, she had “deep,

meaningful conversations” with her co-workers and that being drunk helped her bond with other co-workers because everyone was “loosened up.” Finally, Carrie expressed that even though she and her co-workers drink together, they all “look after each other” to make sure no one gets too intoxicated and to take care of other co-workers if they do, which added another layer to the feeling of being part of a family for her.

Michael Dietler’s notion of alcohol as “embodied material culture” is also relevant to understanding alcohol use among restaurant workers and the sense of community identity as being part of the restaurant “work family” are concerned. In this view, alcohol is a “special kind of material culture created specifically to be destroyed, but destroyed through the transformative process of ingestion” into the human body and because of this, it has a rare and close relationship to both the “inculcation and symbolization of concepts of identity and difference in the construction of the self” (Dietler, 232). That is, alcohol use plays an active role in constructions of community identity and in this case, a feeling of belonging for those who work in the industry. As he also points out, alcohol consumption is usually surrounded by a set of cultural rules and beliefs that is “even more emotionally charged than with other foods and drinks” (Dietler, 232). Thus, alcohol is a form of material culture and social tool that is subject to “almost unlimited possibilities for variation” and a tremendously charged symbolic medium (Dietler, 232). In this case, the meaning of alcohol and its use is to facilitate and create a sense of community among restaurant workers through a shared sense of exhaustion or frustration from the labor itself by partaking in the drinking ritual of regular “heavy” drinking.

Normalization of “Heavy” Alcohol Use in Restaurant Work Communities

However, as Jess had already begun to express to me earlier in our interview, the normalization of alcohol use in the restaurant work environment can facilitate both functional

and dysfunctional outcomes, such as the potential abuse of alcohol. Jess realized the normalization of heavy drinking in restaurant work is problematic. She explained that while working in a restaurant, she thought drinking everyday (around seven beers) was “normal” and when talking to friends who worked in different occupations, they would be surprised that she drank that frequently. She also stated that:

If somebody was ever concerned about their drinking, and they went to go work at a restaurant, they'd be like, “Oh, I'm fine actually, like, I really don't even drink that much.” Like, I think that it just encourages people to kind of overlook any problems that they might be having with it because it's so normal.

Further, she claimed that when co-workers seemed to look physically ill or were “acting recklessly” due to excessive drinking or other illicit drug use, other co-workers did not feel like they could approach them about this because “you can't really get on to somebody for doing the same shit that you're doin'.”

All of my informants, actually, expressed that there was a “heavy drinking culture” in the restaurant industry and an ambivalent attitude towards excessive drinking. Thomas expressed the same sentiment as Jess regarding the normalization of “heavy” drinking among restaurant workers and Carrie also expressed the lack of acknowledgement from other co-workers if it seemed like someone was drinking “too much.” Thomas explained that drinking heavily is “almost expected” in the industry, stating that:

I feel like if someone were to say, “oh yeah, I don't drink or I don't smoke weed or do these drugs” you would get a weird look from other restaurant workers like, “how can you get by without doing this?” and it's not really judgement but, like, I don't know, some people might see that as weird.

He also stated that if someone were “from the outside looking in” at the restaurant industry, they would probably think “”yeah, those people probably have some major issues with alcohol.””

Carrie also relayed to me that she thought other co-workers “were probably heavy drinkers”

before working at the restaurant and that once they started working there, it probably “heavied it up more.” Although she realized she did not drink as much as others, she explained that they can probably “handle more” than her, thus she did not feel it was her place to say anything to co-workers if she thought they were “drinking too much.” She then said that her attitude was non-judgemental and she figured that they should do their “thing,” and that “if it helps” them “get through the day, take a shot.”

In addition, Jess acknowledged the social pressure to drink that existed in her restaurant work experience. She stated that sometimes even when she did not feel like drinking after work, she felt obligated to and that other co-workers would often pressure her to. Additionally, she discussed how when other co-workers would intermittently “take breaks” from drinking, they would often be ridiculed and then begin drinking at the same rate shortly after said break. Doern and Kates also found that the social meanings of drinking in a restaurant context are centered around the pressures to conform to group norms, which significantly ease the “social interaction of staff members on the job, particularly in the stressful context of working with a demanding public” (Doern and Kates, "The Social Meanings of Drinking: Strengthening the Social Bonds of Restaurant Employees"). The authors concluded that drinking symbolizes social acceptance for restaurant workers and encourages an atmosphere of sociability, which also seems to be the case in my informants’ descriptions of drinking.

Challenges/Changes in Restaurant Work Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Indeed, work-related stress was a consistent theme in all of my interviews and clearly intensified during the pandemic, although not all respondents reported using alcohol as a way to cope with it. Bea, for example, when asked what she liked about working in a restaurant stated that she liked that the stress kept her skinny. Bea discussed that a lot of her stress derived from

her position as a manager and having to work about 55 hours a week. During the pandemic, Bea's restaurant became severely understaffed and she struggled to "keep up" with all of the changing CDC guidelines and enforcement of them for employees and customers.

Understaffing in restaurants was a common theme in survey results and interviews as well as feelings of resentment towards customers and management due to possible COVID-19 exposure. One survey respondent said the restaurant industry "really showed its true colors over the last year" and that they left the industry because they were not content with "being a lamb to a slaughter anymore." Another survey participant claimed that they left the restaurant industry because management was "putting profit for the store over the health of the store's employees." Others reported that they did not feel safe at work anymore due to possible exposure to COVID-19 and that they were "fighting for basic safety measures to be taken, only to be ignored." Concerns regarding the safety of their health led many respondents to leave the industry, resulting in periods of unemployment for them as well, and, inevitably, increased feelings of stress.

According to survey responses, the pandemic shed light on already existing issues in restaurant work communities and compounded them, forcing many to leave the industry which has resulted in the current labor shortage in the industry. Survey respondents were asked what some of the challenges the pandemic has caused for restaurant workers and stress was a recurrent theme. One participant responded to this question that:

Trying to follow the health department mandates to the best of our ability, while trying to please customers that could care less about the pandemic is a joke. To be honest, people in this industry have always had problems with alcohol abuse and this pandemic has either pushed people out of the industry and saved them from that or has caused those left to slightly increase, to be honest, we're just tired, and sometimes after our shift it's seen as absurd to drink at 3am but that's our happy hour.... So what's the difference between that and the average person who gets off work at 5pm and pounds 6 happy hour beers in a couple of hours and is home by 8pm?

Another respondent referred to the pandemic as “a blessing in disguise,” stating that restaurant work includes “wages that should be illegal,” being treated as “less than human” by customers and management, and that when business slowed during the pandemic, “the real toxic nature of that beast started to show more clearly.” Additionally, a participant reported that the loss of income and lack of job stability during the pandemic was their biggest challenge and that they felt “expendable by an industry that relies on tipped wages to pay its workers” and that if it was not for the stimulus payments they would “probably be homeless by now.”

Each of my interviewees’ experienced unemployment at some point during the pandemic and expressed the stress they felt about their ability to make rent payments, feed their loved ones, and the general anxiety many felt during the pandemic about contracting COVID-19. During times of unemployment, each interviewee reported drinking more, which, as previous studies show, is a usual response to work-related stress (Chrzan, 94).

Alcohol Use During the Pandemic

So, how might restaurant workers’ drinking practices and behaviors transformed during the pandemic given the many challenges they were presented with? According to Jess, she, along with other co-workers, began drinking more. Even when bars and restaurants began closing down or only being open for take-out, the bar across the street remained open to restaurant workers only for a short period of time and co-workers would still drink together. However, because of Jess’ concern for the health of her and her spouse, she did not continue to go to the bar. She instead began video chatting or Facetiming other co-workers and they drank together virtually. Jess explained that those virtual meetings strengthened her bonds with some other workers and those relationships helped her cope with the various challenges she was facing during the pandemic. Jess also shared with me that, especially once she was unemployed, she

was drinking constantly, that is, all day everyday, at home alone. She would often be drunk by 1:30pm and cited that at one point, she finished a large bottle of vodka by herself after two days.

Thomas also struggled with his drinking during the pandemic and told me a very unexpected and heart-wrenching story during our interview when I asked him what his experiences with alcohol have been like. He responded that his experiences were mostly bad and that he did not drink much until he started working at his current job, although, he did not place the blame of his increased drinking on the restaurant per se. However, he did state that the encouragement of drinking within it surely did not help his inclination to drink regularly and “heavily.” He stated that at the beginning of the pandemic he began drinking more to “deal with” his own “personal problems.” He shared with me the progression of his alcohol use to the point where it was “obvious” he “had a problem.” He further explained that:

I couldn't really cut down on my drinking. I couldn't really force myself to do that but like I would drink throughout the day and by the end of the night I would just be blackout and not remember what had happened. Um, but it got to the point where, like I lost my marriage because of it. Um, I went to rehab. I visited a mental hospital a couple of times, um, so, and that all happened within 2020 so, you know, it kind of hit me like a sack of bricks in the face so it was like yeah, I have an alcohol problem.

I was curious to gain more of an understanding regarding what he and my other informants believed constitutes “heavy drinking” or when drinking becomes a “problem,” which I will address in the latter part of this paper. However, first, I will address how the drinking rituals with other co-workers evolved at the start of the pandemic.

Thomas explained to me that he and other co-workers continued to drink together in person at the beginning of the pandemic and currently. There were some shifts in their drinking rituals, however, due to bar closures and the restrictions caused by the pandemic. Instead of their usual ritual of going to the bar across the street, co-workers would stay at their restaurant after

closing and they would “even bring our own hard liquor and--the drinking actually increased even though we didn’t go across the street as often.” He stated that another change was that instead of everyone sitting at one table “drinking and smoking and talking,” they tried to social distance and sit at other tables. He would not stay after closing and drink with other co-workers for very long. However, he would go home and drink “over a 12 pack a day” by himself. On his off days, he usually drank from the time he woke up in the morning until he fell asleep.

Bea and Carrie had different responses than Jess and Thomas in the sense that they did not stay in touch or drink with co-workers after their restaurant closed down or during periods of unemployment. They both, however, reported that their drinking increased during the pandemic. Bea, even though she does not identify as a “drinker,” stated that she drank “three times” with friends during the three months while she was unemployed, which was “crazy” for her because she had never drank that much in that span of time before. Carrie, however, explained to me that when the pandemic first began, she was a “heavy drinker.” She relayed to me that she drank mostly whiskey or vodka every day alone in her bed and had many “blackout nights” where she lost consciousness. However, since Carrie has gotten back to work she discussed with me how she does not drink alone anymore and tries to know her “limit” when drinking with coworkers now because she does not want to have “blackout” nights or drink by herself because it is “boring.” Bea, now that she is employed at a retail store, reported that she has not had a drink since those first three months of the pandemic.

Jess expressed to me the ways in which her drinking evolved since the beginning of the pandemic. She stated that she was beginning to become “worried about her liver” and that her experiences with alcohol during the pandemic have now caused her to associate the substance with an overall negative feeling or attitude. Jess cited feeling hungover or sick on most days and

that once she found employment again, she began drinking less. She now attempts to only drink on the weekends and limits herself to six drinks maximum. Jess explained that she is now in the process of getting her “shit together” and that she doesn’t feel as pressured to drink as much. She reminds herself that she “doesn’t need to drink everyday” and is learning to “cut herself off” when she feels intoxicated. She told me that she currently cannot remember the last time she was hungover, which, “has got to mean somethin” in the sense that she is making progress in managing her alcohol consumption.

Thomas, after being in and out of treatment over the past year, also reported a decrease in his alcohol use. However, he is not entirely sober currently and his alcohol use fluctuates, as he stated:

That [reduced alcohol use] wouldn’t have happened without, like, someone intervening. Like I mentioned, I went to rehab, um, and a couple of times I went to a hospital, um, but like that helped and each time I came back from the hospital I would, you know, stay sober for a while but usually pick it back up, um, but it never really got back to the point where it was like at its worst, you know?

Like Jess, Thomas also associates alcohol with negative feelings, however, still drinks to “wind down” after a particularly hard work day. He usually still drinks shift beers with co-workers and comes home afterward to drink more solitarily.

My interview respondents were not the only restaurant workers drinking more heavily during the pandemic. According to responses to a survey I conducted, about half of the respondents (7 out of 15) answered that their alcohol use increased during the pandemic and 3 out of 15 reported that it remained the same. 5 respondents reported that their alcohol use decreased during the pandemic. When asked to describe their typical drinking occasion since the pandemic began, some of the common responses included drinking “constantly everyday” or “every other day.” One respondent also cited the ways in which their other co-workers were

drinking as well, stating it had increased and that they went from having “few beers and a couple of shots a night” to “double the beers and double the shots.” Other responses also cited that due to the “lack of a social life” during the pandemic they would drink as a source of entertainment while they were at home alone.

Restaurant Workers’ Beliefs about “Heavy” Alcohol Use

It is now important to turn to the beliefs my respondents conveyed to me regarding alcohol use and its meaning to better understand how the effects of alcohol may be embodied or enacted. This is because, as Dwight Heath’s (1958) work with the Camba of Eastern Bolivia demonstrated, cultural beliefs play a large role in shaping drinking behaviors. He found that although participants drank heavily, they did not exhibit the “aggression, boisterousness, or clowning as seen in other cultures with heavy drinking” (Glasser, 18). Heath concluded that an understanding of culturally constituted beliefs about the effects of alcohol is key in determining the effects of heavy drinking (Singer 2012). In addition, Craig MacAndrew and Robert Edgerton’s (2003[1969]) cross-cultural study of drinking behavior demonstrated that the ways people act when drinking to intoxication is contingent on how they learned to drink and that drinking is socially integrative in some cultures but produces “changes for the worst” in others (Glasser, 17). These studies suggest that the meaning alcohol has to a particular group (e.g. viewing alcohol as an intoxicant, food, medicine, or as having sacred/religious significance, etc.) impacts not only the ways in which people drink, but also their behavior while intoxicated. That is, this research shows that the ways people perceive, interpret, and react to physiological stimuli are culturally learned and embodied behaviors (Dietler 2006).

In this case, it is important to unveil the meanings and beliefs around alcohol and its use that my informants expressed to me in order to better understand how those may be causing

restaurant workers to drink more during the pandemic. I asked all of my informants what they defined as “heavy drinking” versus alcoholism and some of the factors they thought may influence some people to drink more than others. There was a large amount of variation in each of their responses. Jess defined heavy drinking as “if you’re like getting black out drunk everyday, that’s probably pretty heavy drinking. So, like, ten or more?” She defined alcoholism differently, however, stating that it “would affect your daily life to the point that you wouldn’t be able to do your job without being drunk or, like, doing anything without having a drink.” When asked what factors she felt contributed to some people drinking more than others, Jess cited that “everyone handles things differently” but that for restaurant workers, they probably drink more because of the “abuse” that they withstand everyday from customers. Additionally, Jess stressed that the shift a person works (morning versus night) plays a large role in how people drink, stating, “some people aren’t made to be night shift people and that really affects, like, just their mental state in general, which would make you wanna drink more.”

Thomas explained to me that there is a “blurred line” between heavy drinking and alcoholism. He stated that heavy drinking is “drinking everyday even if it were just like 3 beers but like drinking everyday and not being able to stop that habit” and “not being able to take a night off from drinking.” However, he defined alcoholism as “if you’re waking up everyday and drinking, you know, 12 beers everyday that’s--that’s alcoholism.” He explained that the main factor in the restaurant industry that may influence people to drink more within it is the “hectic” work environment of “trying to keep up with everything can be overwhelming” and that he figures that is why many “rely on alcohol to get through it.”

Bea’s responses starkly contrast with those I received from Jess and Thomas. She defined heavy drinking as “more than like one night a week drinking over four beers.” Alcoholism, in her

view, is when “you have a dependency where you feel like you have to have it [alcohol] to have a good time, I guess and um, you do messed up shit while drunken.” What was interesting, however, is that she brought up that she figured other restaurant workers would probably have different definitions of the two. When I asked her how she thinks others in the service industry would define them, she stated it would probably be “like 20 beers a week” or more. Bea’s responses are significant due to the fact that although she is not a “drinker,” based on her experience in the industry, she also has the impression that restaurant workers drink “heavily.” Lastly, Bea did have a similar response as my other interlocutors regarding the factors that influence some people to drink more than others. She stated that, at least in the restaurant industry, it is the “stress” of the job that contributes to increased alcohol consumption.

Finally, Carrie described heavy drinking as synonymous with alcoholism. That is, not being able to go a day without drinking or “drinking to get drunk.” She explained that using alcohol as strictly an intoxicant is “scary” to her because “you can’t remember what you’re doing.” She explained that she, instead, she “drinks to have fun” with other co-workers, who are more her “friends” than co-workers. She discussed how drinking becomes a “problem” when:

You start, like, not caring about people around you. There’s a time and place to be drunk and if you’re just being drunk all the time doing your day to day things and not thinking about like “oh, I’m drunk. I probably shouldn’t be doing the things I am doing.” It’s like just not taking into account the other responsibilities you have because you can’t do everything while you’re drunk, no matter how much you think. It’s just like drinking eventually changes a personality.

Like my other respondents, she also stated that some of the factors that can cause restaurant workers to drink “heavily” is dealing with the stress of the job and rude customers.

Conclusion

In sum, these findings show that alcohol use has increased among restaurant workers during the pandemic. Some of the contributing factors include the sheer physical and mental

stress of restaurant work itself as well as the social conditionings within restaurant work environments surrounding alcohol consumption. That is, the large and meaningful role alcohol plays in the socialization of restaurant workers into the service industry. Further, the norm, as it seems based on previous research and my own within restaurant work environments, is to drink regularly and heavily, whether during, before, or after work hours. This norm, and the beliefs around alcohol use became embodied prior to and during the pandemic as restaurant workers attempted to cope with the many challenges they faced during this time, partially through increased alcohol use. Drinking rituals with other restaurant workers were increasingly significant in the evolution of my informants drinking habits during the pandemic with the exception of one individual (Bea). Put another way, the socialization, bonding, and sense of community that existed between restaurant workers through repeated, shared drinking practices framed most of my informants' ideas of what "acceptable" drinking behaviors were when they were quarantined during the pandemic and led to increased, solitary drinking at some point or another during the pandemic.

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