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A neighborhood study regarding the relationship between social identity and street corner drinking

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my deceased parents, Paul and Irma Hoskin, who raised me to be the woman that I am today. To my adult children, Tamika Michelle Hoskin Jones and Samuel Lonzo Hoskin, who were supportive of me throughout my endeavors, thank you for your words of encouragement, and your financial, spiritual, and emotional support. You are my blessings from God and I thank God for you.

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Dr. Michael M. Nusbaumer, PhD

Dr. Paul Leighton, PhD

I could not have made it without each one of you. Thank you for sharing your time and giving me your support. Your expertise and professionalism helped to make my dream come true. I must give a very special thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Reiling. Thank you for taking a chance on me, for encouraging me, and being patient with me. You have been a great advisor, teacher, mentor, and confidant.

Sincere thanks to the corner drinking men and the neighborhood-family members and friends who welcomed me into their space and allowed me to study their world. I appreciate each and every one of you.

ABSTRACT

This study offered valuable insight into a sub-cultural setting where heavy drinking on the street-corner occurs among a group of African-American men. Data were collected via participant observation, with two primary goals: first, to study street-corner drinking within its larger contextual settings--the family, the neighborhood and larger society--in order to more fully contextually ground this practice; second, to describe the many facets of the identity of the man who drinks on the street corner, rather than view him only as a drinking man. It became evident that the corner drinking men could be considered heavy or problem drinkers, yet ones who had reached a level of functional tolerance: even though they consumed alcohol throughout the day, the men were able to perform chores for their neighbors, and they were clearly well integrated into, and an important element of, the neighborhood's identity. They appeared to have developed "racial victorization," the ability to value who they were in spite of the uncontrollable external force of everyday racism. Rather than be ashamed of their lives, of which they knew the "outside" world disapproved, their public displays of drinking came to be understood as a political statement in defiance of society's labels.

A NEIGHBORHOOD STUDY REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN SOCIAL IDENTITY AND STREET CORNER DRINKING

by

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Thesis

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

Throughout history, alcohol has been an important part of American culture, serving as a legal, recreational drug. It also has been a popular drug of choice for most people, commonly used during social events. Some people have also used alcohol to self-medicate, as a sedative to calm nerves or ease pain, or as a mind-altering tool used to survive difficult times or escape trauma (McMorris et al., 2002). Other people, however, have viewed alcohol as a “poison” that has paralyzed lives, destroyed families, devastated neighborhoods, and killed both the “abusers” and their “victims.” Regardless of one’s opinion about the drug, and even though most people are social or moderate drinkers (Dufour, 1996), we know that some people drink heavily, and it has been noted that a relationship exists between heavy drinking and many social problems (Liebow, 1967; Anderson, 1978; Perreira and Sloan, 2001; Galvan and Caetano, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

The consumption of alcohol, particularly in heavy amounts, has been linked to serious medical, psychological, interpersonal, social, and economic problems. In the past, nearly 100,000 deaths each year in the United States were attributed to drinking, constituting up to 77% of all fatal falls and 39% of fatal automobile accidents. Alcohol is heavily involved in violent crimes, including homicides, suicides, and family violence. Persons who were treated for alcohol-related illnesses in large urban hospitals constituted 20-40% of their patients (President and Fellows of Harvard College; 2002). In addition, the Lewin Group reported to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA, 1999) and the National Institute on Alcohol

Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA, 1999) that the total estimated cost to society from alcohol and drug abuse in 1992 was \$246 billion. This estimated cost reflect a significant increase over the past twenty years (National Institute on Drug Abuse and National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism).

We have reason to believe that heavy drinking has a particularly negative impact on African Americans living within impoverished urban areas. Most studies of African Americans focus on the practice of heavy drinking and comparisons of drinking patterns and drinking problems among African Americans versus Euro-American populations (Jones-Webb, 1998). Research indicates that African Americans are less likely to drink than their Euro-American counterparts, but among those African Americans who do drink, the rate of heavy drinking is similar to that of Euro-Americans (Jones-Webb). There is evidence, though, that African Americans have longer heavy drinking “careers” than Euro-Americans (Caetano and Kaskuas, 1998).

Even though African Americans are less likely than Euro-Americans to drink, African Americans are more likely to die of alcohol-related illnesses, injuries, and car crashes (Stinson et al., 1993). Heavy use of alcohol by those African Americans who drink, combined with inequalities in health-care delivery could be contributing factors to these differences in health outcomes (Martin, Tuch and Roman, 2003). In addition, nearly all explanations of the relationship between African Americans and poor health outcomes are more likely attributed to a person’s socioeconomic status (Martin, Tuch and Roman).

The practice of street-corner drinking, an associated behavior that has often accompanied heavy drinking, has been constructed as a social problem that occurs primarily

within African American communities. It is problematic, though, that this practice has not been sufficiently contextually grounded to give a more full understanding of public displays of drinking on the street corner, in general. Instead, street-corner drinking has been stereotyped as a “black problem,” as has drug use, overall (Liebow, 1967), even though a lower percentage of African Americans use drugs compared to Euro-Americans (Jones-Webb, 1998). This stereotyping has contributed to further stigmatization of African American culture, a circumstance that has consequences for African Americans as individuals, as well as collectively (Anderson, 1978; Wilson, 1996; Oliver, 1999; Hall, 2001 and Krysan, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to focus on one particular neighborhood to study adult African American men who engaged in street-corner drinking, with two primary goals in mind: First, to study street-corner drinking within its larger contextual settings--the family, the neighborhood, and larger society--in order to more fully contextually ground this practice; second, to describe the many facets of the identity of the man who drinks on the street corner, rather than view him only as a drinking man. The primary research question was about the meaning and function of group membership for the individual within a group where drinking is the primary activity.

Significance of the Study

This study offered valuable insight into a subcultural setting where heavy drinking is thought to occur--the street corner. Getting a better understanding of the social context in

which drinking occurred shifted the manner in which the drinker was viewed—for example, was the drinking really “heavy,” or was that a socially-constructed stereotype? Specifically, the drinker may become better understood as more under the influence of the social context than under the influence of the drug itself. Social context, after all, has been identified as a key factor in the relationship between heavy drinking and social identity and/or group membership (Tajfel, 1981; Akers, 1985; Henslin, 2000; and Schwalbe, 2001).

Nusbaumer and Reiling (2002) highlighted the importance of the social context in which drinking occurred in their study of the consumption patterns of bartenders. They discovered that bartenders were fairly heavy drinkers, compared to the general population, as others have also noted (Nusbaumer and Reiling). More important, they further discovered that it was not that the bar subculture “taught” bartenders to drink heavily, but rather, it was more that already-heavy-drinking bartenders gravitated to the bar to find companionship and a sense of community among like-minded folks. In other words, context mattered.

It was discovered in this thesis research that those who engaged in street-corner drinking were similar to the bartenders in several ways. First, both the bartenders and the street-corner drinkers were members of a drinking subculture. In both cases, members chose to congregate in environments where drinkers gathered to drink alcohol. The primary differences between the two groups was that the bartender was also the drug “dealer,” if you will, and that the bartender’s consumption took place in a “private” setting in that it occurred indoors and in sight of only fellow in-group members, whereas the street-corner drinker’s consumption was a more “public” act in that it occurred outdoors and therefore in full view of non-group members.

A mixed-method approach was used to collect data for this thesis (Creswell; 2003), beginning with participant observation, which involved spending time with members of the group in their social context--basically hanging out with them on the street corner. In addition, face-to-face interviews with individual street-corner drinkers were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Data were also collected via informal interviews with adult family members of the drinkers and with other adult members of the neighborhood. These informal interviews would more correctly be described as casual conversations that naturally occurred while spending time on the street corner and in the neighborhood with the drinkers, such as when attending neighborhood block parties. This study was designed to capture as many dynamics involved in street-corner drinking as possible and to sufficiently contextually ground the study so as to not further pathologize street-corner drinkers in African American neighborhoods.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Drinking as Deviant Behavior

Even though drinking is currently a legal activity and a very common practice in the United States, norms regarding its use have been constructed. Spradley has noted the following: “Although most people are aware that American culture restricts drunkenness to certain times and places, they are surprised to discover that the act of drinking itself is also restricted. The places where one may drink without violating the law are limited in general, to licensed premises such as taverns, night clubs, restaurants, and more private places such as homes (Spradley, 1970, p.118).” There was no strict consensus concerning drinking norms, except that generally, any form of “abusive” drinking is unacceptable (Akers, 1985). For example, heavy drinking was almost always considered to be deviant (Akers).

Deviance was defined as breaking the norms set by the dominant culture, and the people who break the rules were labeled as “outsiders” or deviants (Becker, 1963). Sutherland’s theory on differential social organization suggested that mainstream culture consists of numerous conflicting subcultures that have their own norms and values, and the decision to obey or violate the rules was determined by individual circumstances (Lanier and Henry, 1998, p.139). Akers (1985) further argued that criminal behavior is learned through social interaction, and that criminal behavior is either reinforced or discouraged. According to Matza and Sykes (1998), mainstream culture and deviant subcultures co-exist and share conventional values. Members of deviant subcultures relied on techniques of neutralization (or, as some would say, “excuses”) to deny responsibility for their criminal behavior (Lanier and Henry, 1998, pp. 147-149).

Previous research studies have examined the relationship between heavy drinking and social problems. During the sixties, heavy drinking was problematized as it came to be associated with impoverished urban communities and with crime, violence, looting, and fires that destroyed neighborhoods (Spradley, 1970). Heavy-drinking subcultures emerged and became known as "Skid Rows," "bottle-necks," or "bums." These groups made street curbs, park benches, and alleys their homes. They were considered a "menace" to society, and demands to keep "bottle-necks" out of sight became evident when, in 1965, more arrests occurred for public drunkenness than any other crime in the United States. In fact, reports indicated that out of 6 million arrests in the United States, in that year almost 2 million were for public drunkenness (Spradley).

Today, mainstream culture believes street-corner drinking to be deviant behavior and views its participants as outsiders or deviants. However, from the perspective of street-corner drinkers, group membership may function as nothing more than a supportive haven for heavy drinkers to gather for sociability (Nusbaumer and Reiling, 2002). Additionally, street-corner drinking groups may serve as a refuge where some men find temporary relief from their faults and failures (Liebow, 1967). The street-corner drinking men in this study were unemployed due to loss of jobs, poor health, or refusal to accept unstable jobs paying menial wages. To outsiders, they were viewed as failures, but to insiders they were valuable members of the group. In their eyes, the street-corner drinking men were overseers of the neighborhood, protecting family, neighbors, and friends. Although these men did not have stable or steady employment, the corner drinkers did odd jobs for their neighbors for little or no pay, and this made them productive members of their community. Liebow noted, "On the

street corner, failures are rationalized into phantom successes and weaknesses magically transformed into strengths (1967:139)."

The Importance of Social Context in Understanding Drinking

Social science research has demonstrated that differences in the rates of drinking reflect the function of tradition and the role of alcohol in various social contexts. Much of the research has been limited, however, in that heavy drinking has been conceptualized as an independent rather than as the dependent variable, and much of the research has not been built upon a strong theoretical framework (Nusbaumer, Mauss, and Pearson, 1982).

Nusbaumer et al. treated heavy drinking as a dependent variable, however, and found that frequent exposure to drinking establishments was the principal factor contributing to heavy drinking and that taverns and bars were examples of social contexts in which heavy drinking may be learned behavior.

To further clarify this causal relationship, using alcoholic beverage servers as their population, Nusbaumer and Reiling (2002) conducted a study to determine the extent to which public establishments may be places that trained drinkers to be heavy drinkers (learning hypothesis) versus the extent to which the environment merely created a supportive haven for already-heavy drinkers (selection hypothesis). Rather than discover bars and taverns to be places that produced heavy drinkers, they discovered that these establishments functioned as a supportive haven for already-heavy drinkers to gather (Nusbaumer and Reiling). Akers noted that drinking behavior was heavily influenced by a person's culture, group membership, and identification, particularly when drinking in taverns, bars, and on street corners, where drinking was an expected, accepted, and supported behavior

(Akers, 1985). A group can be defined as a number of people who share similar norms, values, expectations, and a sense of belonging, and who frequently interact with one another (Schaefer, 2003). In-groups had a sense of loyalty and sometimes a sense of superiority; out-groups are those for whom the in-group felt antagonism (Henslin 2000; Schaefer 2003). The integration of people into groups has been described as an inverted refrigerator: "...groups form to create warmth for their members, but they necessarily create some outward coldness in order to be able to do so" (Ashmore et al., 2001, p.63). Several studies suggested that heavy drinking was more prevalent among African American adults who were socially and economically disadvantaged, undereducated, and unemployed (Paschall and Flewelling, 2002). One of the most serious social problems facing urban communities was the high concentration of people who have been identified as the "new urban poor"—working, but still poor. This problem was attributed to the disappearance of work, particularly in the areas of manufacturing and unskilled labor (Wilson, 1996).

According to Liebow (1967, for the most part, street-corner men desired to fulfill their financial responsibilities but were unable to obtain steady employment with decent pay. Men who belonged to what Liebow (1967 called the "don't-work-and-don't-want-to-work minority" made up only a small percentage of the street-corner population, yet they were significant. The feelings they had about refusing to work were an outward expression of the values and attitudes related to "making a living." In fact, in his study, those same feelings appeared to be held by most of the men within the street corner community, and it evidenced itself in their decision-making regarding job-related issues (Liebow, 2003, p. 22). This was also true of the street-corner drinkers in this study, particularly of the younger men. They

would rather not work at all than to take a job paying minimum wages. The social context of drinking was defined as the place where and the time when people gathered to drink with others (Clapp and Shillington, 2001). An important question surrounding the relationship between deviant drinking and the social context was why some people drink on the streets and others do not. Research in this area has been concerned with both motivational factors that influenced why a person drinks and situational factors that influenced where and when a person drinks (Thombs, Beck, and Mahoney, 1993). In any given situation, a person may drink in order to have fun, to get drunk, or to socially interact with others in a way that may not be thought to be possible without alcohol (Thombs et al., 1993).

Recent studies in the United States examined the relationship between community settings and alcohol problems while taking into account the individual behaviors that occurred in a particular environmental context. According to Gruenewald, Remer and Lipton (2002), drinking alcohol in certain settings may expose the drinker to different levels of risks, especially when heavy drinking may lead to driving intoxicated. Taverns and bars, barbershops, carry-outs, street corners, alleys, and other public establishments served as important "gathering places" or "special hangouts" for urban poor and working-class people who lived in impoverished urban communities.

These social contexts were settings for sociability where people in the neighborhood gathered to drink. It was where they mingled with their equals, the one place where they could go and feel like they were somebody. They created their own subcultural norms and defended themselves when threatened. This was the place where people gained a sense of personal self-worth, amongst neighbors and friends. Settings outside of the neighborhood

may be strange, cold, impersonal, and too formal. The social setting of the neighborhood was where people felt they belonged (Anderson 1978).

Some individuals consumed large quantities of alcohol in an effort to relieve stress and rid their minds of negative thoughts (Armeli, Tennen, and Affleck, 2000). The street corner may be a place where heavy drinkers went to escape from reality. In this setting, the drinker was accepted by group members who shared the same feelings and dilemmas. As Leibow noted, at home the drinking man may be perceived as irresponsible and "less than" a man, but on the street corner, he could be a "ladies man," and he could blame the woman in his life for his infidelity and failures (Liebow, 2003). In many cases, the street-corner drinking group may be as important as his immediate family (Henslin, 2000).

Drinking Norms

Akers had identified several contexts where "drinking-centered groups" may congregate: tavern groups, formal and informal parties, neighbors, clubs, ceremonial and celebration gatherings, conventions, and skid-row bottle gangs (street-corner drinkers) (1985, p.162). Within these group situations, drinking within the guidelines of the group norms was rewarded with positive reinforcement, and even when heavy drinkers surpassed the set limits, drinking groups were hesitant to apply negative sanctions (Akers). Families, peers, and friends were the most significant groups responsible for setting the guidelines for alcohol consumption. These groups constructed normative patterns, which consisted of "normative qualities," identified as acceptable, tolerable, and inappropriate drinking levels (Krohn, 1985 and Wister, 1985). There were four types of normative patterns: 1) proscriptive norms require total abstinence; 2) prescriptive norms allow limited drinking; 3) ambivalent

environments have no set guidelines; and 4) permissive environments have specific rules and sanctions that include heavy and frequent drinking. Sometimes, though, there was conflict within the group's "normative climate" (Krohn and Wister). According to Akers (1985), there was a relationship between permissive and ambivalent environments and heavy or problem drinking, and conflicting beliefs concerning the norms of these two patterns generated the "climate" that was most likely to produce problem drinkers.

In some social settings, abstinence or light drinking was unacceptable, and being sociable required participation in social drinking. Abstinence or light drinking may constitute deviant behavior in relation to the minimum drinking norms of many drinking contexts (Paton-Simpson, 2001). In this regard, street-corner drinking could be considered socially obligatory. The shared expectations of the group may have dictated mandatory participation in drinking, and non-participation may have been interpreted as deviance. Abstinence and light drinking on street corners, as in other heavy-drinking contexts, may have caused suspicion and raised questions about a man's sociability and maturity. In both cases, there may have been verbal pressure to drink or to increase the level of alcohol consumption (Paton-Simpson, 2001). Nonconformity to the group's norms could have resulted in non-acceptance by the group.

Social Identities and Group Integration

Communities and neighborhoods were places where sociability was generated through life experiences and social interaction. Symbolism gave community meaning by providing the "means for their expression, integration and containment" (Cohen, 1992, p. 21). Each member of the group played a vital role in the make-up of the group's collective

identity, just as the group identity was an integral part of the individual's personal identity.

As Henslin had noted, "It is difficult, if not impossible for us to separate the self from our primary groups, for the self and our groups merge into a 'we'...their values and attitudes become fused into our identity" (Henslin, 2000. p.104).

The concept of identity, then, was the notion that a part of who are evolved out of the sameness that we shared with members of our group (McCarthy, Haslam, Hutchinson, and Turner, 1994; Ashmore, Jussim, and Wilder, 2001). Social identity, as defined by Tajfel (1981), was "...that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). When individuals embraced a group identity, they learned how to properly interact with others, and he learned the normative rules of both the dominant culture and the subculture they were members of (Schwalbe, 2001).

Summary

Limited research was available addressing the alcohol-related problems of African American populations in urban areas, yet this was definitely an area of study where much could be learned about the dynamics of alcohol use. Recent studies in the United States have addressed the relationship among environments where people resided, the alcoholic beverages they consumed, and the problems experienced in various communities. This research came from the perspective that individual drinking behaviors are influenced by environmental contexts where those behaviors occur.

Social identity theory could lead us to believe that street-corner drinking could be more than a behavior. As such, social identity theory served as the theoretical framework

from which this study examined the importance of the identity as “street-corner drinker” within the individual’s identity set, and the degree to which this identity subsumed all others. In addition, the neighborhood “climate” that produced street-corner drinkers and the manner in which the climate supported, them could be better understood.

One street corner within a predominantly African American urban neighborhood was the setting for this study. Adult men who drank on the corner and their adult family and neighborhood members were the primary populations of interest. Many research studies have heretofore examined deviant drinking as a part of the dominant culture, but there was much to be learned about deviant drinking embedded in the culture of a neighborhood.

Five primary questions guided this research:

- To what extent do men learn to drink on street corners verses to what extent already-heavy drinking men gravitate to the street corners to find support for their heavy drinking?
- What are the accounts these men give to explain why they drink outside rather than inside; in other words, what is the meaning of drinking on the corner, to what extent is their public display a purposeful demonstration, and of what?
- To what extent and in what ways is street-corner drinking supported by family and other members of the neighborhood?
- How important is the drinker’s identity as a street-corner drinker, vis-à-vis his other identities?
- How much importance does the drinker’s family and neighbors give to that aspect of his identity?

In addition, a second subset of questions suggested by Gallmeier and Nusbaumer (1988) were used to examine in-group dynamics:

- Do all members use alcohol equally, or is there a "heavy drinker" distinction within this group?
- What is the purpose or function of alcohol use within the group?
- Are group members engaging in any other activities while they are drinking on the corner?
- To what extent is their alcohol use ritualized?
- Does their alcohol use position them as outsiders within the neighborhood?
- To what extent are these men integrated into their families and neighborhood?

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Research studies on street-corner drinking groups required the use of non-traditional methods of both collecting and analyzing data. Gallmeier and Nusbaumer (1988) suggested the following guidelines: 1) upon entrée, observe the social and environmental conditions; 2) remain aware of the quantity of drug use for reasons of safety and quality of data collected; 3) during the initial contact, observe only and not take notes openly until accepted by the group; 4) be prepared to give an explanation for non-participation in drug use; 5) be prepared to give an account of previous drug use; and 6) be aware that group members will likely be wary of those suspected of being “informers.”

Because street-corner drinkers were participants in a highly stigmatized, deviant behavior, Miller and Tewksbury (2001) suggested that the investigator should be aware that group members might be on guard against exploitation and victimization. As such, and because collecting data prematurely had the potential risk of lowering the quality of data or producing inaccurate responses (Gallmeier & Nusbaumer, 1988; Miller & Tewksbury, 2001), it became very important to establish good rapport and to gain trust and respect prior to collecting data.

The data for this research were collected in an overt fashion (I informed the participants that I was a researcher), via a mixed-method approach, using a combination of qualitative methods (Creswell, 2001). The qualitative methods included participant observation (although researcher was not drinking) with a group of street-corner drinkers, and audio-taped (if permission had been given), face-to-face interviews with individual group

members. Data were also collected informally through casual conversations that occurred as I spent time with group members' adult significant others (wives/girlfriends, parents, and/or adult children) and other adult members of the neighborhood. My attendance at the annual neighborhood block party was one example of these naturally occurring opportunities for casual conversation.

Because the participants were members of a street-corner drinking subculture, it was reasonable to assume that the men would be drinking during the observation periods. Since the use of alcohol alters a person's state of consciousness, as well as his/her perceptions, their reality would also be altered (Gallmeier and Nusbaumer, 1988). There was not concern, however, that this altered state would distort the data because it was precisely this altered state that I was trying to understand. An argument could be made that the best way to understand why these men drink on the street corner was to ask them while they were on the corner drinking.

It is important to note, however, that informed consent to be observed and to be interviewed was obtained from each group member while they were in a non-intoxicated state. The interviews were conducted before drinking began for the day, as well. Informed consent was obtained during a time when it was reasonable to assume that the man would be sober, and during a time when the man appeared to be sober. In addition, individual group members were asked to attest that they have not consumed alcohol for at least four hours prior to discussing the elements of informed consent. My training and experience as a certified drug counselor helped me assess the participants' levels of intoxication.

Because drinking on a public street corner was technically illegal, I did not ask the participants to sign the consent document. To further insure confidentiality, because group members generally used street rather than given names, I did not ask their given names or their addresses, nor did the group members supply this information.

Methodology

In selecting the neighborhood to study, I first identified groups of street-corner drinkers throughout a large urban area within a major metropolitan area, located within a midwestern state. One particular group on the east side of the city was identified, which appeared to consist of African American males between the ages of late twenties and over sixty-five. This group was chosen for primarily four reasons: 1) they appeared to congregate more frequently than others (increasing opportunities for observation); 2) members of my family were known in the neighborhood (improving chances of gaining entrée and important for safety reasons); 3) a “knowledgeable” (a female neighborhood resident) was available to me (important for safety reasons); and 4) the group met primarily during the day (an important safety issue).

I gained entrée to the men by first spreading word about the neighborhood study via the female neighborhood knowledgeable. After news of the study had been informally spread around the neighborhood, the group was approached. A time was scheduled to meet with the group early enough in the day to assume that the men would be sober, at which time the research was explained and their participation as a group was solicited.

The extent to which a researcher participates in the life of the group under study has long been debated as a methodological issue among field researchers (Gallmeier and Nusbaumer, 1988; Miller and Tewksbury, 2001). In this case, I was a participant observer throughout the entire research project, but even though I was spending time with the men on the corner while they were consuming, I did not consume alcohol. I clearly explained to the men that the University prohibited researchers from using any form of drugs while collecting data.

Participant observation took place for three hours per day (between the hours of 11:00 A.M. and 2:00 P.M.), three times a week, for a period of three months, for a total of 108 hours of observation. To ensure both quality of data and informed consent, I observed the participants while they were drinking, but I would leave the area if a significant number of group members appeared to be intoxicated. The rationale for my presence while they were drinking was that I needed to understand the street-corner drinkers' behavior at the precise time they were engaging in that behavior (Miller and Tewksbury, 2001), rather than rely on their retrospective accounts. I would also leave the group if individuals who were known to be or who appeared to be minors joined the group based upon preliminary, informal observation of this group from a distance, however, only adult men participated in this group.

I used behavioral indicators of intoxication, such as redness of face, drowsiness, clumsiness, facial expressions, slurred speech, mood changes, response of companions; disturbing others, and quantity consumed (Burns, Nusbaumer, and Reiling, 2003), to estimate

the participant's level of intoxication. It was important to note that work as a certified drug counselor and my many years of experience in alcohol treatment programs were factors that greatly increased my ability to assess intoxication.

Private, face-to-face interviews with individual members of the drinking group were conducted throughout the three-month observation period. The interviews were conducted in a public place that ensured the participant's privacy, such as in a nearby park. The interviews were conducted early in the day, before drinking had begun. I did not conduct the interview if the participant appeared to be intoxicated.

Data were also collected informally from adult family and neighborhood members via casual conversation that occurred during the observation period. One example of these naturally occurring opportunities was the block party that I attended. All data were analyzed using Esterberg's plan for analyzing qualitative data (Esterberg, 2002).

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Gaining Entrée

Socially, street-corner drinking was considered to be deviant behavior, and legally, in the location of this study, an open container on a public sidewalk constituted illegal behavior. For these reasons, it was anticipated that the street-corner drinkers would be highly sensitive and suspicious of the reasons why they were being studied, as has been found to be true for other deviant groups (Miller and Tewksbury, 2001). Therefore, establishing and maintaining respect and acceptance throughout the study was crucial (Miller and Tewksbury).

After gaining entrée, I followed the guidelines suggested by Gallmeier and Nusbaumer (1988) for using non-traditional methods when collecting and analyzing data. Gaining entrée, establishing good rapport, and earning respect was not as difficult as it could have been, though, because I was already known within the neighborhood. At the time this study was conducted, I had family that resided in the neighborhood. This partially can account for why it was not difficult nor did it take a long time to gain entrée or trust.

It was still important that I follow the guidelines suggested by Nusbaumer and Gallmeier, (1988) and Miller and Tewksbury, (2001). This was a vulnerable population that openly participated in breaking the law by drinking on a public street (Miller and Tewksbury). I was careful not to offend them or cause them to become suspicious of me (Nusbaumer and Gallmeier, 1988). In spite of the family acquaintance, I could not afford to take them for granted.

Early in the research, I had the opportunity of attending the annual block party, which

helped facilitate entrée, too. The participants and their neighbors were supportive and very cooperative. As one participant's wife commented, "One thing about you, you know how to come home. Other people go to strangers, but you came back home."

Despite the fact that I was not a stranger among them during the initial contact, I was careful to get their permission to conduct this study, and I expressed much gratitude and appreciation. I informed them that the research could end at will and without question, at their request. The participants expressed feeling honored that I had chosen them to participate in my research study. It gave the street-corner drinkers a sense of importance and self-worth.

The participants set the time for the study to begin daily, and they signaled their readiness by making noise when they began to gather. Conversations were very informal, and usually took place while the corner drinkers did odd jobs for their neighbors, who paid them based on their ability to pay. Because I was already familiar with the setting, I guarded against complacency by reminding myself each day to be aware of my surroundings through the eyes of a researcher, such as making a mental note of the amount of alcohol being consumed, as suggested by Gallmeier and Nusbaumer (1988). Also as they suggested, I decided not to take notes overtly for a while (1988). Most of the data were recorded privately, immediately following the observation for that day.

To prevent the participants from being distrustful of my not fully participating in their group, I explained that as a student, the University restricted me from participating in any drinking or drug use. They said they understood, but this did not stop them from continuing to offer me a beer, to which my response was always, "Thanks, but no thanks. I cannot

participate.” Collectively, all of these practices minimized suspicion of my motives, which contributed greatly to the success of this study (Gallmeier and Nusbaumer, 1988; and Miller and Tewksbury, 2001).

Description of the Neighborhood and Group Members

The social setting where this study took place was a residential area with single dwellings, reportedly about 50% homeowners and 50% renters. Most of the residents have lived there more than 10 years. All of the corner drinking men lived with, and were supported by a woman, whether it be a significant other or a family member. Carey lived with his mother and Popeye lived with his significant other and her grown children, who included Baby Brother. June Bug lived with his sister and Ray Ray lived with his wife and their children. Jitter Bug and Bubba lived with a family member.

The block where the street-corner drinkers lived was a one-way, dead-end street, so there was not much traffic from “outsiders.” This made it easy for Popeye and Carey to identify strangers on the block and check out their intent. The neighborhood was quaint and for the most part, everybody knew the “insiders” from the “outsiders.” The street-corner drinking men usually gathered in front of Popeye’s houses, which was located nearest to the dead-end portion of the block.

At the end of this block was a vacant lot, owned by the city. It would be safe to conclude that the corner drinking men were aware that their public drinking was unlawful because they were careful not to congregate on city-owned property, although they would have been less conspicuous there. They tried hard to get the neighbor who lived next to the vacant lot to purchase it so that they could set up a business on that lot (although they never

indicated the type of business they would open), but she refused. Instead, they continued to congregate on the sidewalk in front of Popeye's house or in his driveway. The neighborhood was more to the corner drinkers and their neighbors than a location for their homes: the entire geographic space was home. This aspect made this corner- drinking group unique because they, they, in turn, made the city block where they lived the home place where they drank, instead of drinking in isolation on park benches and in alleys, as did others who would drink in outdoor, public spaces (Spradley, 1970).

Contrary to past research studies where “Skid Rows,” “bottlenecks,” or “bums” were discovered to live on street curbs, park benches, and in alleys (Spradley, 1970), these men lived in houses, and three of the eight participants were buying their own homes. These corner-drinking men upheld some of the stereotypes associated with heavy drinking, but their picture proved to be much fuller than that. Although heavy drinking was the primary group activity, the meaning and function of group membership was actually not so much about the drinking; the influence of the group, on the individual as well as on the neighborhood, extended far beyond the influence of the alcohol. The make-up of this particular corner-drinking group was quite colorful and varied, and to fully understand the dynamics of this group, it will be helpful to first get an impression of each man.

Carey-Drama King Leader

Carey, the 51-year old drama king leader on the block, was quite a colorful character. Along with his charismatic personality, Carey had a sense of humor and he was fun to be with. Carey loved being what he called the “HNIC” (“head-nigga-in-charge”). Carey’s presence on the street corner could perhaps be understood through his belief in himself as the

personification of Leibow's drinking man as one who, at home, was perceived as irresponsible and "less than" a man, but on the street corner, he was a "ladies' man," who could blame the woman in his life for his infidelity and failures (2003). Carey's words, thoughts, and actions personified his "heyday," a time he reported himself to have been suave, cool, and electrifying to the ladies. In Carey's mind, he was still a "ladies' man." Carey had convinced himself that he was the key ingredient that was needed to make a single woman's life whole. Carey flirted with the ladies, using enticing words, with the promise of "rocking their world into sheer ecstasy." Carey needed a lot of attention and found creative ways to get it. Carey tried to make life itself revolve around him.

Carey recently lost his "soul-mate" of many years to a terminal illness. Although she was gone in the flesh, Carey reported his love for her to be undying and unconditional. Carey missed her tremendously, and he yearned to have that kind of love again. In actuality, Carey's "soul-mate" was the one who had unconditional love for him because she was the one on the receiving end of the pains and sufferings that come with living with a heavy drinker or chronic alcoholic.

Carey tried desperately to recapture what he once had in hopes of filling the huge void in his life. His famous line to the ladies was: "Man can't live by bread alone." This was the line he used to justify his strong presentation and sudden rush for an intimate relationship. Rejection was hard for Carey to accept. Sometimes, he ignored it and other times, Carey clowned and tried to pretend that it did not bother him. The study period coincided with a

difficult time for Carey because it was the first year anniversary of his wife's death. Group members, family, neighbors, and friends were there to support him. It was this kind of love and support, along with Carey's faith, that he reported helped to sustain him.

Popeye--Overseer and Co-Leader

Popeye, 45 years old, was a co-leader, who appeared to be the most level-headed member of the group. He referred to himself as the "go-to-guy" when a group member or neighbor needed help. If Popeye did not have the answer, he knew where to go to get it. Popeye was an overseer of group members and caretaker of the neighborhood. According to Popeye, nothing went on in the neighborhood that he didn't know about. If it didn't meet Popeye's stamp of approval, it was not going to happen or continue. Nobody was allowed to bring harm or destruction to the neighborhood. Because Popeye and Carey were very protective of their home turf, they routinely walked the neighborhood, being watchful of strangers or outsiders on the block.

If a person did not check out by having a connection with a group member or neighbor, he or she had to leave. The group members would gather out front, making it known that particular person's presence was not welcomed. As a result, the intruder soon left the block with the understanding that he or she was not to return. Popeye was the instigator of these encounters. One day, a couple of unfamiliar men were sitting in a car on the block while Popeye observed them. He called the other group members, who traveled house to house to see if anybody knew who they were. When they discovered nobody knew them, the corner drinkers went over to the car to inquire who they were and what they wanted.

Words were exchanged, and the strangers started up their car and moved off the block, and as far as this investigator knows, those strangers never returned. Popeye valued his extended family that had been his support and treasured his home as a safe haven that kept him out of trouble. Popeye was loyal to those who were loyal to him, and he was grateful to be a member of a group and a part of a family who cared.

Jimmy--Senior Member

Jimmy was only 41 years old, but he had the greatest longevity within the group, having been a member for 16 years. Jimmy was confident and saw himself as a role model for the other group members. Although Jimmy spent a lot of time drinking with the street-corner men, he did not let it interfere with family outings to the park, movies, and so on with his children or an evening out with his wife. At times, Jimmy would be cocky and condescending towards other group members. He did not appear to have been affected by the negative stigma associated with street-corner drinking.

Jimmy was proud to be a member of the corner drinking group because the group was a part of his family. They were his brothers, and Jimmy was very defensive of the street-corner drinking group. The group's identity was an integral part of Jimmy's personal identity, and he played a role in the collective identity of the group (Henslin, 2000). Jimmy was protective of the group and became irritated when asked why they drank outside instead of in somebody's house or in the neighborhood bar. He responded with indignation: "It's just what we do....when we're drinking together; we're talking about life, sharing our feelings and talking about what's going on in our personal lives. It is where the group would

come together and talk men-talk.” When asked to define “men-talk,” Jimmy’s response was “sports and sex.” Jimmy was pretty much a private person and did not appreciate intrusions by outsiders. He was the most quiet and reserved member of the group. Although Jimmy thought of himself as a leader, Jimmy was more of a follower, like Ray Ray.

Ray Ray--The Follower

Ray Ray was indeed a follower. He had a laid-back, nonchalant personality. Ray Ray basically supported the group’s collective decision. Ray Ray was 37 years old, with a wife and school aged children to whom he was devoted. During his corner drinking and around other times, he drove his children to and from school, and he did odd jobs around the house and neighborhood. Ray Ray was family oriented and saw the group as an extension of his biological family. When a group member was in trouble, Ray Ray was right there to support him. When a neighbor needed help, Ray Ray was there to lend a hand. He was not quick to volunteer for additional responsibilities that come with leadership, but Ray Ray was a strong supporter of his street-corner family. Ray Ray preferred to step in when he was ready rather than be expected to instigate a plan or take part from the beginning.

June Bug--Single Parent

Thirty-six-year-old June Bug drank with the group every chance he could, primarily because it was an opportunity to spend time with the man who helped raised him, his stepfather, Carey. June Bug was a single parent looking for an older woman to “hook up” with so she could help him take care of his child. June Bug spent a lot of time with his offspring, but he faced many challenges that come with single parenting. June Bug was

looking for an older woman because he believed an older woman would be more supportive and willing to be a mother to his child. Past relationships, however, proved that older women did not care for the amount of time he spent with the corner-drinking group. June Bug's family gave him a lot of help and support with his child, but he still desired to take care of his child on his own, with the assistance of his own woman.

Jitter Bug--The Realist

Jitter Bug, at 31 years of age, was nearing the peak of his heavy partying days and expressed that he was beginning to take life more seriously. He started drinking and partying at a young age and now felt it was sort of "boring." Jitter Bug had begun to give more thought about what he was doing with his life versus what he should be doing. Jitter Bug drank alcohol for relaxation but felt he would be more successful in his life without it. Although he expressed a desire to cut back, alcohol continued to play a key role in his life, as evidenced by his daily 12-pack of beer consumption. Jitter Bug had begun to see things in a more realistic light and gave more thought to the consequences of his actions. Jitter Bug indicated that he realized he could do more with his life.

Bubba--The Cool Dude

Bubba was 27 years old but still liked to "party hearty" with his cool buddies. He was a nonchalant, carefree kind of guy. Bubba reported that he had no emotional ties to the street-corner drinking group, though. Bubba was an unusual group member because for him, it was all about the alcohol. When interviewed he stated: "Sometimes we're cool and sometimes we're not cool. We're not really family." Bubba had been drinking with the

group for about two years, and he did not believe there to be a bond between them. He reported that he could “take them or leave them.” He explained that there was a tendency for younger guys not to bond with the older group members because there was a good chance that the younger guys would get married or “shack up” with women who lived outside the neighborhood. For that reason, time as group members or even drinking buddies would be short-lived.

Baby-Brother--The Mentee

At 25, Baby Brother was still thought to be immature and silly. Perhaps because of his young age, similar to Bubba, he had mixed feelings about group members and expressed some negative attitudes. In some ways, he said, they were like family, but he countered: “It changes from day to day, friends today and might not be friends tomorrow.” Baby Brother did not really see any value in his relationship with the young guys. For Baby Brother, drinking with the group was “a learning experience about other brothers.” He still did not take life seriously. Baby Brother had a lot of respect for the older guys, and he looked to them for wisdom. According to Baby Brother, being a part of the street-corner drinking group was teaching him how to be a man. He was learning manhood from the older guys. Baby Brother was mimicking what he saw the older guys do. In fact, Baby Brother was following in the footsteps of his mother’s significant other, Popeye, who was the father figure in his life. He was already a heavy drinker when he joined the group, and he felt comfortable with an environment that was supportive of heavy drinking.

Life on the Corner

The goal of this research was to examine five primary research questions about the life of the street-corner drinking group:

- To what extent do men learn to drink on street corners verses to what extent already-heavy drinking men gravitate to the street corners to find support for their heavy drinking?
- What are the accounts the men give to explain why they drink outside rather than inside; in other words, what is the meaning of drinking on the corner, to what extent is their public display a purposeful demonstration, and of what?
- To what extent and in what ways is street-corner drinking supported by family and other members of the neighborhood?
- How important is the drinker's identity as a street-corner drinker, vis-à-vis their other identities?
- How much importance does the drinker's family and neighbors give to that aspect of their identity?

In addition, a second subset of questions suggested by Gallmeier and Nusbaumer (1988) was used to examine in-group dynamics:

- Do all members use alcohol equally, or is there a "heavy drinker" distinction within this group?
- What is the purpose or function of alcohol use within the group?

- Are group members engaging in any other activities while they are drinking on the corner?
- To what extent is their alcohol use ritualized?
- Does their alcohol use position them as outsiders within the neighborhood, and to what extent are these men integrated into their families and neighborhood?

The discussion that follows provides answers to each of these sets of questions.

Answers to these questions have been organized and reported on according to three primary themes: patterns of alcohol consumption and use; the function of street-corner drinking; and the meaning of street-corner drinking. This will give an overview of the dynamics of street-corner drinking and the man who drinks on the corner.

Patterns of Alcohol Consumption and Use

In the United States, studies have indicated that drinking pathology is high among males, particularly among African American males (Maddox, 1998). When asked during their private interviews about their drinking history, all of the participants indicated that beer had been their first encounter with alcohol. Commonly, they had been introduced by a family member or friends. All but Carey began as under-age drinkers, between the ages of 14 and 18, and none reported having a high school education. This resonates with the fact that nearly 60% of high school drop-outs between the ages of 18 and 24, who currently drink, begun drinking before age 16 (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, NIAAA, 1998). Carey was first introduced to “alcohol, scotch, beer, everything” by his dad when he was four years old, the earliest age that Carey could remember. Every participant reported that a heavy drinking pattern was developed as a teenager, but their consumption increased

after becoming a part of a group where heavy drinking is accepted, expected, and supported (Akers, 1985; Nusbaumer and Reiling, 2002).

Five participants said their friends had introduced them to marijuana at an early age, too. It was no surprise that Carey was the one who consumed the most alcohol and had a poly-drug history, that included “heroin, cocaine, marijuana, everything except hallucinogens like LSD—White folks drugs.” He was also the only one who reported drug treatment experiences. Having been in 10 treatment centers, he indicated that, “They were all good, cleaned me out when I wanted to go.” Treatment for Carey was a temporary fix, and based on his response, there were times when he was mandated or pressured into treatment. Apparently, it was not always his decision to go, even though Carey said he was never pressured not to drink.

When asked during private interviews about current drinking practices, all participants admitted to drinking beer on almost every day of the week. Beer was their preference because it was cheaper and the easiest to access. The older men reported drinking a six-pack a day, and the younger men reported drinking twice that amount. Each man reported that, prior to becoming members of the street-corner drinking group, they were already drinking a lot, although their alcohol consumption increased after joining the group. This could be perceived as evidence of how social settings function as supportive havens for already-heavy drinkers to gather (Nusbaumer and Reiling, 2002). The street-corner drinking men reported an increase in alcohol consumption after they joined the group, which suggests that their already-heavy consumption was reinforced through social interaction (Akers,

1985). In fact, all of the men did most of their drinking with each other.

Chronic alcohol consumption could cause “heavy” drinkers to develop a tolerance to the effects of alcohol (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, NIAAA, 1995). Tolerance occurs when it takes more alcohol to reach a previous plateau. When the brain functions adapt in order to compensate for alcohol interfering with normal behaviors and bodily functions, functional tolerance has developed (NIAAA). Chronic heavy drinkers may develop functional tolerance, show fewer signs of intoxication, and perform tasks where others would be too impaired to perform or the level of alcohol consumption for others may be fatal (NIAAA). It was evident that the street-corner drinking men, who consumed high levels of alcohol daily, may have developed functional tolerance because they could function, performing various tasks throughout the neighborhood. For example, when the street-corner drinkers were trimming trees throughout the neighborhood, Carey was clumsy, with redness of the face, and slurred speech. The other group members had redness of the face and they all smelled of alcohol. These are behavioral indicators of intoxication as described by Burns, Nusbaumer, and Reiling (2003). At one point, after Carey climbed to the top of a tree, he sat on a branch that was too weak to hold him. Although the group members kept telling Carey to get off of that branch, Carey refused to move until he almost fell. Everybody burst out laughing, and Carey was embarrassed as he climbed down. From that point on, Carey was not allowed by the others to climb back up a tree. Instead, the younger guys did the climbing. The street-corner drinkers continued to sip beer while working. All of the above-mentioned, including Carey's behavior to the point of disturbing other group members, were behavioral indicators of intoxication (Burns, Nusbaumer, and Reiling,

2003). Though intoxicated, the street-corner drinkers still managed to get the jobs done.

Times have changed from earlier years in the handling of public drunkenness or street-corner drinking by the police. In past years, such as the sixties, this type of public drunkenness would have warranted incarceration, but today, the decision would be at the police officer's discretion (Rumbaut and Bittner, 1979). The quantity of alcohol that the street-corner drinkers consumed may have been a large quantity for others, but for the street-corner drinkers who probably had built a high level of tolerance, it was a relatively small amount. Today, street-corner drinking or public drunkenness is handled differently due to political uprisings and social crises in the 1960s that led to reform in the relationship between the police and those policed (Rumbaut and Bittner, 1979).

Prior to that time period, due to political pressures from elite “outsiders,” public drunkenness was unacceptable, and in 1965, out of 6 million arrests, almost 2 million arrests, were made to remove “Skid Rows,” “bottlenecks,” or “bums” from the streets (Spradley, 1970). Massive political upheavals and social crises in the 1960s called for reform in the role of police, however, particularly among the policed minorities and the urban poor (Rumbaut and Bittner, 1979). This resulted in major police reform with a move towards the exercise of police discretion, peace-keeping, and police-community relations (Rumbaut and Bittner).

Now public drunkenness is overlooked at police discretion. As Skolnick (1979) pointed out, the phrase “law and order” is deceptive due to conflicting ideologies. “Law implies rational restraint upon the rules and procedures utilized to achieve order. Order under law, therefore, subordinates the ideal of conformity to the ideal of legality” (Rumbaut and Bittner, 1979; p. 251). This conflicting ideology places the police in the position of a social

institution. The move to improve police-community relations could account for the reason why there were no encounters with the police regarding drinking on the streets. Also, living on a dead-end street with very little traffic could make personal contact with the police less probable, even though this street-corner drinking group congregated every day, at the same place and same time.

The primary function or purpose of the group was for sociability or support. The relationship between the older members of the group was close. Older group members had been together 8 to 16 years and the younger members had only been together for 2 years. The relationship between the older members was one of brotherhood, although the younger members appeared to have a strained relationship. As “Baby Brother-The Mentee” expressed, “We’re friends today and not friends tomorrow.” “Bubba-The Cool Dude” said “We’re friends, not really like family. Sometimes we’re cool and sometimes we’re not cool. Sometimes we argue and fall out with each other. “Jitter Bug-The Realist” stated that he had, “mixed feelings, negative vibes in and out. Some shake my paw and some don’t” (when they were cool, they referred to each other as “dogs.”) “More like friends today and not friends tomorrow. They talk good and bad. Start talking good then drink too much and talk bad but no harm meant, bad attitudes.” The younger guys were more like “drinking buddies,” not friends. Distrust among group members where the young men are concerned was evident. Often times, the young men got drunk, wanted to fight, and suggested doing wrong things. “Jitter Bug” said, “You know the saying, drink but don’t get drunk. Start off positive, get drunk and turn negative. May get drunk and suggest you go rob a store or might get violent and wanna fight.” With the young men, there was no strong emotional tie or bond

They appeared interested in only putting monies together to buy beer and making sure they got their share of the drinks.

Generally, the older members of the group began gathering at 10 o'clock in the morning, the younger guys joined them at noon, and the beer drinking continued throughout the day. A typical day ended watching sports on a television that had been placed outside, or playing cards, mainly bid whisk, into the late evening or early morning hours, all the while drinking more beer. The younger guys played checkers while drinking. There did not appear to be any pressure to drink more alcohol (perhaps because members were already drinking enough to meet the standard), nor did there appear to be attempts to manage someone who may have been drinking "too much." All of the men appeared to understand the group norms and monitored their own alcohol consumption. Even when the heaviest drinker in the group surpassed what non-group members would have defined as clearly too much, nobody said anything, and negative sanctions were not applied, as Akers would have predicted (1985).

There was one circumstance, however, when the group would intervene. If a group member strayed off the block and stayed gone too long, group members would go to find him and bring him back home. "Popeye-Overseer and Co-Leader" said, "If I'm on a binge away from home, they come and get me. They can tell when something is bothering me and vice versa. They're older and they understand better. I really, really appreciate that. I'm in love with these cats and this block."

The Function of Street-Corner Drinking

The sociological purpose of all groups is to create warmth for their members by necessarily creating some outward coldness to freeze out outsiders (Ashmore et al., 2001).

This would explain why not every man in the neighborhood gravitated toward this group; not every man met what appeared to be three criteria for membership: unemployment, already heavy consumption, and the acceptance of street-corner drinking by their significant others.

The need to be an already-heavy drinker appeared to be the most important requirement. As Paton-Simpson (2001) has pointed out, within a heavy-drinking group, heavy drinking is socially obligatory, and to not do so is considered a deviant act. Not meeting this criterion caused the corner drinking men to freeze other men out if verbal pressure on the prospective member did not cause him to drink more (Ashmore et al., 2001).

It further appeared to be the case that all three criteria must be met. The case of one prospective member illustrated this well. Although he was a heavy drinker, his significant other did not approve of the group, and whenever he attempted to join them, she would summon him by cell phone or physically come out to get him. In addition, he was employed, which probably explains his wife's investment in managing his drinking. Because he could not satisfy two of the criteria for group membership, he was never allowed to become a member of the group.

The older men appeared to be highly sensitive to the needs of their members, and they reported that they were on the lookout for, and could recognize the symptoms of, depression. When they knew a member was hurting, they would lend him a hand or a strong shoulder to lean on. They explained that they do not allow group members to stay depressed. If a member of the group isolated himself from the group or strayed from home, they would go and get him. If he was at home, group members kept knocking on his window until he came out. All while drinking beer, they talked about what was troubling their group member and

helped their troubled brother work through his problems. As “Popeye” explained: “The group is very supportive. Keep me on the straight and narrow. They watch me. They’ll ask: Hey ‘nigga’ come on out. Where are you? What’s going on? They can tell when I’m troubled or worried. They brought me a long way. Good shoulder to lean on.”

Although the heavy and public drinking of the men constituted deviant and illegal behavior, there were no signs of any other form of illegal activity while in the group. To the contrary, the men were otherwise engaged in conforming activities. Of particular note was their care taking of the neighborhood, which took primarily two forms: doing chores and providing street surveillance.

The men were, indeed, very protective of each other and their neighborhood, and they were very territorial. Strangers could not just walk up to them and join the group. You had to know somebody in the group and be introduced to group members by a member. “Baby Brother” said: “We can’t just know your dog, we got to know you.”

African American males are blamed for their unemployability due to poor education and lack of preparation for new technology, and about 44% of them are “functional illiterates” (Blake and Darling, 1994). Even though the group members were unemployed, they were not inactive. The older men reported that they were unemployed due to loss of jobs or failing health. The younger men simply refused to work for minimum wages, preferring to remain unemployed. These younger street corner men belonged to what Liebow (1967) called “don’t-work and don’t-want-to-work minority.” They expressed

wanting to fulfill their financial responsibilities but could not find steady employment with decent pay (Liebow). Refusal of work was an outward expression of the values and attitudes related to “making a living.” Those same feelings appeared to be held by the older men, too, and it evidenced itself in their decision-making regarding job-related issues (Liebow).

Some would say that this was merely an excuse, and the real reason they did not want to work was that steady employment would take them away from their street-corner drinking. That could be the case; but it is also the case that the men were not inactive. In fact, a typical day began with sipping beer while doing odd jobs for little pay in the neighborhood, such as mowing lawns, trimming trees, painting rooms, repairing porch steps, and fixing roofs. When the neighbors needed work done, they would speak with one of the group leaders, Carey or Popeye, who would make arrangements with the other group members. The more strenuous work was done by the men who were the least intoxicated and most healthy.

Even though the men had created a separate subculture, it did not exist in isolation from the larger cultural context of the neighborhood. Instead, the group appeared to be an integral part of the neighborhood. Their sense of home extended the boundaries of their private residence to include their neighborhood as sanctuary. The corner drinkers’ sense of identity appeared to be inseparable from that of the street-corner drinking group, which appeared to be inseparable from that of the neighborhood. They looked to group members and their neighbors for acceptance, a sense of belonging, approval, and support.

For example, group members would unite for neighborhood gatherings, such as a picnic at the park or the annual block party. The women on the block planned the block

party, and family members, friends, and this investigator were invited to this special event. The street was blocked off by tables and chairs, which were arranged from one end of the street to the other. A large barrel pit was used to barbecue chicken and ribs brought by individual families, and hot dogs, hamburgers, chips, and pop were donated by the neighborhood supermarket. Rhythm-and-blues and oldies-but-goodies blasted from both ends of the block. Children rode their bikes and played basketball in the streets. There was plenty of laughter, drinking, and eating, with neighbors sharing whatever they had with each other, and congregating throughout the day and late into the evening. This celebration has gone on for years, and so far, it has never been cancelled. Even though it rained the year I attended, the celebrants just waited until it stopped, and the show went on—and the street-corner drinkers were an integral part of this.

An unfortunate event occurred at the beginning of data collection that further demonstrated the extent to which the group was integrated into the life of the neighborhood: Carey's wife died, and the whole block was upset. The street-corner drinking men were seen "falling out" in the street, falling on cars with their beer in their hands, crying uncontrollably. The corner drinkers got "toe up from the flo up." And yet, all of the corner drinkers were welcomed inside the bereaved home, where they quite competently acted in a socially appropriate way, offering condolences and support to the family, which meant the world to Carey. Later that evening, the younger guys were seen helping an elderly gentleman walk down the street to Carey's house so that he could pay his respects. The elderly gentleman had been gravely ill but was able to make the slow stride up the street, leaning on the young guys' shoulders for support.

Funeral preparations included the women on the block gathering in each others' homes to plan and make preparations for a full course meal for family members, neighbors, and friends. The block club collected donations for the bereaved family, and one of the neighbors house-sat while they took care of family business and made funeral arrangements. The corner drinkers, their significant others, families, neighbors, friends, and I attended the funeral service. Following the funeral service, the extended family gathered at Carey's house for the funeral feast. Just like street-corner drinking, the coming together of the residents in the neighborhood was an expression of love and a symbol of unity.

What was significant in this otherwise not unusual scenario was that the neighborhood came together to honor the wife of a street-corner drinker, and just as important, the other drinkers were more than welcomed: they were an integral part of the ritual. The neighborhood extended to the corner drinkers what they extend to each other: understanding, support, and respect. The neighborhood motto used on flyers announcing the annual block party, "United we stand and divided we fall," appeared to extend to the street-corner drinkers as well.

The Meaning of Street-Corner Drinking

Neighborhoods were defined as social settings where people gather to enjoy the sociability of their neighbors, to feel accepted, to share feelings, and to find others who can identify with their dilemmas. Neighborhoods provided an ingredient vital to any person: a sense of belonging (Anderson, 1978). But street corners can also be places where heavy drinkers escaped belonging. At home, the drinking man may be perceived as irresponsible and "less than a man," but on the street corner he may be more of a man (Liebow, 2003).

Drug use did not position the street-corner drinkers as "outsiders" within the neighborhood, though. Family members and neighbors appeared very supportive of the street-corner drinking men, although family members reported that sometimes they were jealous of the time the street-corner drinkers spent with the group and away from the family. The women respected their space and reported that they found solace in their men staying within the confines of the neighborhood. They pretty much knew where their men were and what they were doing. Periodically throughout the day, some of the women would be seen peeping out their windows to see if their men were still on the block, or they would come down the street to see what they were doing, although they never stayed long. If one of the men was gone, his woman would get upset and summon him on the cell phone until he returned.

Many have noted that families, peers, and friends set the guidelines for alcohol consumption, normative patterns with "normative qualities," which are identified as acceptable, tolerable, and inappropriate drinking levels (Krohn, 1985; Wister and Avison, 1985). Within this study, it appeared that the main set guideline was that the men stay on the block. This was an ambivalent environment with no guidelines for normative patterns for alcohol consumption (Wistner and Avison, 1985; Krohn, 1985). Family, peers, and friends were supportive of the street-corner drinking group and integrated them into what they perceived as an extended family.

Corner drinking also appeared to be an accepted practice in the neighborhood, too. As long as the corner drinkers kept the noise down and did not trash the neighborhood, a few residents tolerated them, but most supported them. The corner drinkers played an important

role in their community by doing odd jobs, light chores, and handiwork for their neighbors for little pay. For the most part, just like family, peers, and friends, the neighbors were supportive of the corner drinking men and integrated them into this extended family as well. As pointed out in the social identity theory, this street-corner drinking group's identity had subsumed them all--family, peers, friends, and neighbors alike. This was evident by a neighborhood that had produced a "climate" that was supportive of street-corner drinkers.

To most people, though, heavy drinking is almost always considered deviant behavior (Akers, 1985), and sociologically speaking, drinking on street corners was a public act of defiance to societal norms and laws (Becker, 1963). As Matza and Sykes noted, members of deviant subcultures generally relied on neutralization techniques (or "excuses") to deny responsibility for their deviant and/or criminal behavior (Lanier and Henry, 1998; pp.147-149), but when asked why they drink outside rather than inside, the street-corner drinkers made no excuses: "We do it because we can." "It's just what we do." "Sometimes we drink in vans, cars, or on the side of the house." "It's cheaper to drink on the block." "It's safer on the block." "Bars are dangerous." "We all know each other." "Why mess up somebody's house?" "Don't like the smell of alcohol and cigarette butts." "It stinks, why stink up somebody's house?" "Don't want the rigamarole from wives." "No fussing or complaining." "We can talk men talk and we don't mess up somebody's house." "We keep a check on what's going on in our block." "We drink at the same place, same time, same thing."

The street-corner drinkers were aware of what society thought of them: "Society thinks we're nothing. They think we're a bunch of hoods that steal, kill, and destroy. We're lazy and get so drunk that we're not productive." They strongly refute these stereotypes,

though: “We may drink but we are functional. We are productive members of our community. We care about what happens with the economy. We may get drunk but we’re functional.” As further evidence of their rejection of the stereotype, the street-corner drinkers got together and went to the polls to vote in the presidential election. They were proud as they stood in line with big smiles on their faces, as they all pointed out their names in the book, indicating that they have been voting for years.

The street-corner drinkers thought people should mind their own business: “They really don’t know who we are and what we do. We are some alright guys. I’m not hurting anybody and I’m not doing it in their neighborhood. Society wants to tell you where you can and cannot drink. As long as you’re respecting your area, in your car, on the corner, or at the park, it shouldn’t be a problem.” As one of the young guys said, “Being young, you’re learning about the experiences on the street or on the corner. The older cats already know and they can teach us. We still have respect for our neighbors and we do what we can to help. We just choose to drink outside instead of inside. We do it because we can.” Clearly, the street-corner drinkers harbor feelings of resentment and anger toward society. Although society has viewed the street-corner drinking men as outsiders, from the street-corner drinkers’ perspective, society was the outsider, the outcasts who were intruding on their turf. The street-corner drinkers are a group of oppressed African American men, born with what W.E.B. Dubois characterized as a “veil of double-consciousness.” They are seen and heard by an oppressor who is blind and deaf when it comes to them, but the corner drinkers refused to become “invisible men” individually or collectively (Ellison, 1972). The corner-drinkers have refused to acquiesce to what Frye (1983) called the “double bind.”

Although there was no space for them in mainstream society, the street-corner drinkers created their own space. By occupying their own space, the corner drinkers have a voice through presence and actions. They refused to give in to society's drinking norms because the street-corner drinking men chose to drink outside. These men have made a political statement, whether consciously or unconsciously. This was an African American community so the neighborhood shared their experience and understood it, and it is probably why family members and friends were so accepting of what they did. The street-corner drinkers and the neighborhood shared the same philosophy: "United we stand, divided we fall."

CHAPTER 5: Concluding Comments

Coming from a theoretical framework based on the social identity theory, street-corner drinking is more than a behavior. The neighborhood these men called "home" provided a cultural climate that functioned as a supportive haven in which already-heavy drinkers could gather (Nusbaumer and Reiling, 2002). The primary function of this street-corner drinking group was sociability and support. While drinking outside, the street-corner men often played cards and watched sports on television and the younger guys played checkers. Even though the corner drinkers had created a distinct subculture, it was not isolated from the larger cultural context of the neighborhood.

In-groups with a sense of loyalty may also have a sense of superiority (Henslin, 2000; Schaefer, 2003). Symbolically, communities have meaning because they provide the "means for their expression, integration and containment" (Cohen, 1992; p. 21). Within this study, the street-corner group constituted such a community, but certainly not one in isolation. For the street-corner drinkers, their neighborhood provided a safety zone, as well as guidelines that kept them out of trouble. It was the place where they found peace, comfort, acceptance, and love. Their neighborhood was their sanctuary--containment. Doing odd jobs for their neighbors gave them a sense of self-worth--expression. The men, especially the older men, had a high regard for their neighborhood, and, in their minds, being available on the street corner allowed them to protect their neighborhood, which provided them with a sense of purpose--integration.

The street-corner drinking group was integrated into the neighborhood and became valuable assets to their community, which was demonstrated by their willingness to perform

tasks for the neighborhood based on ability to pay. The corner drinker's sense of identity was inseparable from that of the street-corner drinking group and inseparable from the neighborhood alike. They looked to group members and their neighbors for acceptance, a sense of belonging, approval, and support. Perhaps the neighborhood and family members were so supportive of the corner drinkers because they understood their plight as non-working, African American males who faced the negative stereotypes associated with everyday racism--"double consciousness" as noted by W.E.B. Dubois (1961), and the "double bind" as noted by Frye (1983), which is seeing one's self through the eyes of mainstream society versus what reality is to self.

The street-corner drinking group was a unified brotherhood. They refused to internalize the social stigmas, negative stereotypes, and sanctions inflicted upon them because of their race and gender (Battle-Waters, 1967). Instead, they had developed what Battle-Waters called "racial and gender victorization," which is the ability to value who you are in spite of the uncontrollable external force of everyday racism (1967; p. 106). Like the women studied by Battle-Waters, these street-corner men refused to become victimized. They, too, went "beyond surviving, beyond victimization, and beyond blame" (Battle-Waters; p. 106). Drinking outside rather than inside was a political statement of defiance against how street-corner drinkers are perceived by mainstream society as "outsiders," when through their eyes, mainstream society is the "outsider" (Becker, 1963).

Within mainstream society, the street-corner drinkers felt that they had no voice and their opinions were worthless; therefore, consciously or unconsciously, they created their

own space, in their own neighborhood, and on their own turf. In their neighborhood, they were somebody and they had a voice that was heard and respected. These corner drinkers were proud men, demonstrating their pride in the work that they did around their neighborhood and the early rise to the polls to cast their vote. The street-corner drinkers lived in an African American community that accepted them, loved them, shared and understood their life experiences of everyday racism. The street-corner drinkers made their political statement known: they were proud African American men who chose to drink on the corner, and did so for sociability and support. The work of Mandelbaum (1965) resonates well with these findings in that he found that men of African descent drank beer together to achieve physical and social “mellowness,” which gave them an opportunity for social integration, comraderie, and social relations (Mandelbaum).

This study offered valuable insight into a subcultural setting where heavy drinking on the street-corner occurred. The primary goals of this research were first, to study street-corner drinking within its larger contextual settings--the family, the neighborhood and larger society--in order to more fully contextually ground this practice, and second, to describe the many facets of the identity of the man who drinks on the street corner, rather than view him only as a drinking man. It became evident that the corner drinking men could be defined as heavy or problem drinkers (often defined as 3.5 drinks/day and 5.4 drinks/day, respectively (Abel et al., 1998), who had reached a level of functional tolerance (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, NIAAA, 1995). This was demonstrated in their ability to carry out daily tasks in the neighborhood, all the while consuming alcohol. In the case of the street-corner drinkers, behavioral indicators of intoxication were present much of the time,

including redness of the face, clumsiness, slurred speech, response of companions, disturbing others, and quantity consumed (Burns, Nusbaumer, and Reiling, 2003), and yet they were able to function well within the neighborhood.

The primary function of the group was sociability and support. This was not a group isolated from the larger cultural context of the neighborhood. The neighborhood provided the cultural climate for already-heavy drinkers to gather (Nusbaumer and Reiling, 2002), and they were very supportive of them. The corner drinkers gathered at the same time, same place, for the same primary activity, almost every day--to drink outside, along with secondary activities, such as playing bid whisk, watching sports on TV, or playing checkers. The group appeared to be an integral part of the neighborhood. Their sense of home extended beyond the boundaries of their private residence but included the neighborhood as a sanctuary. The corner drinkers' sense of identity appeared to be inseparable from the street-corner drinking group and the neighborhood. In fact, the men were integrated into their neighborhood. The corner-drinking men took care of their neighborhood by doing chores and providing street surveillance. Family members and friends were supportive of the street-corner drinking group; for one, the women knew where their men were and what they were doing, and two, living in an African American community, they understood the struggles of being a Black man or woman in America. The men looked to both the group and the neighborhood for acceptance, approval, a sense of belonging, and support. Street-corner drinking was an accepted practice in the neighborhood. The neighborhood motto, which appeared to be extended to the street-corner drinkers as well, was, "United we stand and divided we fall."

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

