

# Studying ‘Alcohol, Drugs, and Society’ from a Sociological Perspective: Comparing the Academic Performance of Pre-Professionals in Addiction Studies with Students Majoring in Other Disciplines

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**ABSTRACT.** This study compares the academic performance of two distinct types of students enrolled over a five year period in a Sociology class entitled “Alcohol, Drugs, and Society.” Roughly 30% of enrollees take this course as part of their training to become certified addictions counselors through the College of Human Sciences. The remainder come from a wide range of other courses of study, largely through the College of Arts and Sciences. These majors include, but are not limited to, sociology, social work, psychology, history, political science, and journalism. Data reveal that the difference in average grades between the pre-professionals and all others is not statistically significant. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Professionals, addiction studies, sociological perspective, alcohol and drug problems, other disciplines

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## INTRODUCTION

Previous research indicates that 60 to 75% of professionals working as chemical dependency counselors are, themselves, recovering addicts/alcoholics (Kinney, 1983; Sobbell and Sobbell, 1987, Brown, 1991, Banken and McGovern, 1992). Research also indicates that the relative effectiveness of ex-user counselors is not significantly different from graduate-trained professionals (Brown and Thompson, 1975-1976; Aiken et al., 1984a, 1984b, McGovern and Armstrong, 1987, Winick, 1990-1991). Moreover, the broader context within which these issues are studied reveals an increasing emphasis on professionalization and academic credentialing of substance abuse counselors.

The Institute of Medicine (1990) study traces the historical development of the professional addictions counselor. The editors quote Rosenberg (1982): "(T)he typical para-professional alcoholism counselor in 1971 (is) a 40 year old man who was addicted to alcohol but who had gained significant sobriety through involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous" (p. 129). The early days of professionalization involved on-the-job training, supervision, and credentialing which enabled even those without college experience to function as professional counselors.

By the 1990s, professional certification has become increasingly associated with formal education as well as training and supervision from the old-style para-professionals. The proportion of professional substance abuse counselors that are, themselves, in recovery seems to be decreasing while the proportion who have obtained undergraduate and graduate degrees is increasing (Banken and McGovern, 1992). Currently, survey data obtained from the National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (NAADAC 2000) indicate that nearly three of four members have college degrees, and more than half possess Masters level credentials. Twenty years ago, less than 40% held an undergraduate degree (Banken and McGovern, 1992).

Yet we wonder: Might there be important ideological differences between the therapists who are themselves in recovery (and who are much more likely now to also be professionally trained and certified) and those whose expertise derives exclusively from professional training? At the very least, "recovering" persons define themselves in terms of the medical model (Jellinek, 1960; Johnson, 1980). Moreover, Banken and McGovern (1992: 34) indicate that "recovered and non-alcoholic counselors espouse common goals born of a shared philosophy of treatment based on a biopsychosocial understanding of alcoholism." Coun-

selors in recovery are also (within that paradigm) at risk for “relapse” and often subjected to more rigorous monitoring by their supervisors (Kinney, 1983).

Brown (1991) argues that “professional ex-s” draw upon their socialization within a using or abusing subculture in order to reproduce their own recovery process as they treat their clients. In addition to using the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous themselves, thereby institutionalizing the 12-Steps in their therapeutic work, they also use their experience to recruit other ex users to the profession. Professional ex-s also view their work as an expression of gratitude, or even as a form of symbolic payback to those who led them down the road to recovery (Winick, 1990-1991). “Working a program” themselves closely ties the recovering therapist’s experience to that of his or her client. While this often opens the way to greater empathy, therapists who are in recovery also run the risk of over-identifying with their clients and may be suspicious of more professionally trained colleagues who have less recovery experience (Winick, 1990-1991).

Professional certification is becoming an increasing prerequisite for employment as a chemical dependency counselor (Winick, 1990- 1991); professional counselors are becoming more formally educated (Institute of Medicine, 1990; Banken & McGovern, 1992). One wonders the extent to which the spiritual foundation which is so fundamental to 12-Step recovery programs helps, hinders, or has no effect on the process of academic preparation for those pre-professionals who are also recovering persons. To what extent does a 12-Step orientation produce acceptance of, or resistance to a scholarly critique of the medical model? (See Goode, 1999 for an illustrative comparison of competing sociological and psychological models which address how addiction emerges and is treated. See also Peele, 1989, for a forthright critique of the medical model).<sup>1</sup>

This paper compares the academic performance of two distinct groups of students enrolled in an academically oriented, junior/senior level college course entitled “Alcohol, Drugs, and Society.” This course is taught through the Sociology department and is an elective for Sociology majors. The subject matter of the class draws students from across the campus community who use the course to meet general degree requirements in Social Sciences. Moreover, 30% of the students who took this course between 1995 and 1999 were considering certification as professional chemical dependency counselors. Their major field of study was Human Development and/or Family Studies—a department within the College of Human Sciences.<sup>2</sup> The remaining 70%

formed a diverse group of academic majors or more broadly-based pre-professionals. Common major fields of study were Sociology, Social Work, Psychology, and Political Science—primarily majors within the College of Arts and Sciences.

We wonder: Does the dominance of the “Disease Concept” in therapeutic training bias pre-professionals against learning competing theories and contextual analysis? All things being equal, we would expect that average grades of pre-professionals would not differ significantly from those who were involved in a more academic course of study. Yet, while alcohol and drug use and abuse is nominally individual behavior, it occurs within a social context characterized at the very least by the “War on Drugs” and an ever increasing emphasis toward medicalization and criminalization of substance use. Does a contextual analysis in a sociology class represent a kind of academic paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) for those who are more familiar with the medical model?

This study tries to detect the impact of the ideological and spiritual foundation of a 12-Step orientation when measuring students’ performance in a class which studies addiction from a sociological point of view.

## SETTING

This study took place at a large, publically supported state university which is situated in a largely rural part of Southwest; this area is also a predominantly conservative religious environment (Roberts, Koch, and Johnson, 2001). “Alcohol, Drugs, and Society” is a junior/senior level elective which is offered only through the Sociology Department. However, it is also one of four courses which partially fulfills the requirements leading to certification as a Chemical Dependency Counselor through the Departments of Human Development and Family Studies. While “Alcohol, Drugs, and Society” is not expressly required, students seeking certification must choose two of the four electives; this particular class is a common choice.

“Alcohol, Drugs, and Society” is an academically oriented class which does not in any way provide expertise or training in modes or manners of treatment. While “treatment” is listed on the syllabus as one of the topics covered, the manner in which this issue is addressed is more aptly characterized as a comparative critique. While the major modes of medically oriented treatment are compared and contrasted, they are also critiqued, and students are exposed to literature which

raises the question of moderation versus abstinence as a way of reducing the cultural damage associated with abusive drinking and drugging (Fleming et al., 1997; Hodgins et al., 1997; Goode, 1999). Fully 25% of the course is devoted to a discussion of basic Sociological theories and methods. Other topics include the epidemiology of addiction, alcohol/drugs and health, crime, family, work, and race as well as treatment and prevention. The course concludes with a discussion of the social and political implications of drug legalization.

## METHODS

### Participants

Subjects for this study were students who enrolled in a Jr./Sr. level sociology class entitled "Alcohol, Drugs, and Society" during the five year period between January, 1995 and December, 1999 (N = 701). Descriptively, our students are disproportionately female (66.3%), and either Juniors or Seniors (80.1%). Thirty percent are Human Development or Family Studies majors ("Pre-Professionals"). Twenty-two percent are Sociology or Social Work majors; forty-eight percent are "Other" majors.

### Procedure

This work employs the t-test for independent samples as a straightforward method to determine the statistical significance of the difference in means. We used secondary data taken from class rolls and grade reports. We categorized students according to Sex, Major, Year (in which the course was taken: 1995-1999), semester of study (Fall, Spring, Summer), and class rank (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Other). Finally, we averaged the grades by group.

### Variables

The independent variable in this study is students' major. For purposes of distinction, Human Development and Family Studies majors were deemed to be "pre-professionals"; all others were deemed "academics."<sup>3</sup> Since we used secondary data from grade reports rather than collecting survey data from each student directly, we cannot be absolutely certain that each Human Development or Family Studies major in

the study was a pre-professional, or that all others were not. However, class discussions indicate this has been overwhelmingly the case. Moreover, since all students essentially self-select into their respective fields of study, we reasonably presume they have an interest in, and are fundamental agreement with, the basic tenets of their chosen discipline. Students who study addiction from within the departments of Human Development or Family Studies are taught the predominance of the medical model and are socialized to use it therapeutically.

The dependent variable in this study is a comparison of the aggregated grade point average between pre-professional students and others. Grades were averaged according to the standard scale of A = 4; B = 3; C = 2; D = 1; F = 0. Students who either did not complete or dropped the course were excluded from the analysis since no grade was given.

### Analysis

Data analysis involved three steps. First, we determined the mean grade point averages between the two major groups in the study—“Pre-Professionals” and “Academics.” We then used a t-test to ascertain any statistical significance in the difference of means. Finally, we divided the “Academics” into three specific categories of majors: “Social Work,” “Sociology,” and “Other” and tested for statistical significance in the difference of means using analysis of variance. We employed this last segment of the analysis to determine whether Sociology majors stood out because of their familiarity with the foundational principles of the discipline. We also wondered whether Social Work majors are more like “Academics” or “Pre-Professionals.” Our findings follow below.

## RESULTS

Table 1 reports the aggregate grade-point averages by major.

Descriptively, the range in GPA is rather small: 2.97 (for Social Work majors) to 3.10 (for Other majors).

Table 2 reports the results of a t-test for significance in the differences of the mean GPA scores for “Pre-Professionals” and “All Others.”

Since the initial findings were not statistically significant (.653), we did not attempt to refine this test by controlling for Sex, Classification, Year, and Semester.

TABLE 1. Grade Point Averages by Academic Major

Major Field	N	GPA
Human Development & Family Studies	213	3.02
Sociology	97	3.08
Social Work	59	2.97
Other	332	3.10
Total	701	3.06

TABLE 2. T-Test for Equality of Grade Point Averages by Academic Major

Classification	N	GPA	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Pre-Professionals	213	3.02	1.02	7.010 E -02
All Other	488	3.08	1.00	4.525 E -02

  

	F	Significance	t	df	Significance (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal Variances	.202	.653	-.764	669	.445	-6.3188 E -02	8.269 E -02
Equal variances not assumed			-.757	395.59	.449	-6.3188 E -02	8.344 E -02

Finally, Table 3 reports the results of analysis of variance where the categories of the independent variable were more refined.

Again, the differences in mean GPAs between Pre-Professionals and Sociology, Social Work, and Other majors were not statistically significant (.682).

## DISCUSSION

We began this exploratory study in order to ascertain whether an ideological orientation favoring the disease concept of addiction in any way hindered the academic performance of pre-professionals when

TABLE 3. Analysis of Variance for Equality of Grade Point Averages by Academic Major

Major Field	N	GPA	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Human Development & Family Studies	213	3.02	1.02	7.010 E -02
Sociology	97	3.08	1.01	.1084
Social Work	59	2.97	1.07	.1388
Other	332	3.10	.97	5.316 E -02
Total	701	3.06	1.01	3.8022 E -02

## Analysis of Variance

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
Between Groups	1.523	3	.508	.500	.682
Within Groups	70.715	697	1.015		
Total	709.238	700			

studying alcohol and drug use from a sociological perspective. Certification in this field is increasingly dependent upon formal academic training. We wondered whether a favorable predisposition toward the spiritual foundation of 12-Step programs produced an ideological perspective which might be reflected in classroom performance.

This study examined a five-year cohort of students enrolled in a sociology course entitled "Alcohol, Drugs, and Society." The class is designed to present an explicitly contextual analysis and comparative critique of several perspectives on the subject of addiction. We compared the academic performance of over 700 students, 30% of whom were pre-professionals in the field of chemical dependency. We found no statistical differences in the grade point averages of that group when compared to students from other areas of study.

We believe at least two implications can be drawn from this research note. First, there seems to be a place for sociology in the training of chemical dependency specialists. At the very least, competing theories and comparative critique which characterize contextual analysis do not seem to hinder the academic performance of students who might be oth-



erwise inclined. There is no evidence that pre-professionals get caught up in a paradigm shift which creates academic problems for them in a course such as the one described in this study. Second, this study suggests there is room for collaboration among diversely trained students and faculty seeking to advance scholarship in the field of addiction study. Sociologists and therapists might well be able to articulate together, and even adjudicate competing theories through collegial meetings. Collaborative research combining contextual theories and therapeutic modalities can only serve to advance our collective understanding of what often seems like intractable tension when seeking to specify the bio-chemical, social, and psychological roots of addiction. We offer this work as an invitation for dialogue.

### NOTES

1. Erich Goode's *Drugs in American Society*, 5th Edition, is the primary required text used in the college course described in this paper. It is one of the very few explicitly sociological discussions of alcohol and drug use/abuse.

2. We cannot quantify the precise number of these students who were recovering addicts or involved with other associated processes (ACOA, Al-Anon, NA, etc.). Classes were not designed to be part of working a recovery program and those who worked 12-Step programs outside of class revealed that information only at their discretion and often in discussion groups rather than to the instructor. However, we distinguish this group based on the literature cited above which suggests personal involvement in the recovery process aptly characterizes a significant majority of professionals. Moreover, the classroom where other courses associated with the Substance Abuse minor in the Human Development-Family Studies building are taught is the same room where AA regularly meets on campus, and the 12-Steps and 12 Traditions are hanging on the wall.

3. Nine students listed "Substance Abuse Studies" (SAS) as their major. At present, SAS is not an academic major at this university; it is rather the most common minor of Human Development and Family Studies students in this course. For this reason, they were grouped with the Human Development and Family Studies majors and deemed "pre-professionals."

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