

Calculated hedonism and young people's drinking practices

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Abstract

Many young people enjoy alcohol consumption as part of their social lives, but recently there has been increased concern regarding the amount they drink and how they behave in public places when intoxicated. So called 'binge' drinking has become a particular concern in the UK. Such drinking behaviour is often positioned in opposition to 'normal' drinking yet the current consumption environment is one that encourages drinking through marketing and liberalisation of licensing laws. This exploratory study examines perceptions of drinking behaviour by young people actively engaged in social activities that involve alcohol consumption. It identifies a number of themes that inform different drinking contexts and drinking styles and suggests the concept of calculated hedonism as helpful in better understanding young people's drinking behaviour.

Introduction

Alcohol is deep-seated part of everyday life in many countries. In Britain around 78,000 public houses, 25,000 restaurants, 4,000 nightclubs, 23,000 other clubs, and 45,000 other premises, shops and supermarkets are licensed to sell alcohol (Mistral et al, 2006). The new Licensing Act, which became operational across England in November 2005, has introduced the potential for alcohol purchase and consumption 24 hours, 7 days a week. The one major area of restriction on alcohol consumption is by age (Harnett et. al. 2000). Nevertheless, and perhaps because of this restriction, access to alcohol and cultures associated with its consumption are important rites of passage for most young people across Britain. There are well documented historical continuities associated with British drinking culture which demonstrate an uneasy relationship between alcohol and the normative social discourse of the time (Measham and Brian, 2005; O'Malley and Valverde, 2004).

Most recently there has been growing concern with so-called binge drinking. The nature, extent and concept of what constitutes binge drinking has been extensively discussed but defining the term 'binge' is itself contentious (Measham, 1994a). The Institute of Alcohol Studies (2001) acknowledges that the term was originally used in a clinical sense for a person who was alcohol dependent, drinking over a prolonged period until they were physically unable to continue. More commonly now the term is used to refer to a high alcohol intake in a single drinking session. The Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England (Cabinet Office, 2004) informs us that binge drinkers are individuals who drink to get drunk. They are more likely to be male and aged under 25, although women's drinking has been rising fast over the past decade, and they are at increased risk of accidents, alcohol poisoning, and assaults. This has led to increased concern for the health of young people and the risk to others who may find themselves in the same space as those engaged in binge drinking.

Binge drinking has been positioned in opposition to what may be called 'normal' drinking. The discourse around alcohol consumption in government reports, research studies and some marketing communications is of a normal inclusive way to drink alcohol in opposition to binge drinking which leads to illness and crime. The problem with this positioning is its inevitable problematic-unproblematic dichotomy coupled with variations in methods of definition and low threshold of units required to qualify as a binge drinkers (Measham, 1994a).

The context of alcohol consumption in the UK is one that is largely market driven. Some argue that there are contradictory messages coming from the current UK government, which aims to control young people's consumption while liberalising licensing laws. Measham and Brain (2005, p. 278) refer to this as the 'simultaneous processes of economic deregulation and social regulation' which they see as emblematic of a consumer society which both seduces and represses. This reflects an important aspect of the debate around consumers' behaviour and alcohol, namely that the consumption environment is one that both encourages alcohol consumption through a huge range of marketing communication techniques, growth in clubs and pubs targeted at young people and liberalisation of licensing laws, while at the same time requiring restraint in terms of how much alcohol is consumed. Effectively the environment is one of self-responsibility under a market-friendly ideology (Sulkunen and Warpenius, 2000). This is what Measham and Brain (2005) refer to as the culture of intoxication.

While excessive alcohol consumption can be harmful, and anti-social in some circumstances, it is also associated with pleasure (Charters and Pettigrew, 2005). Alcohol may be important for facilitating social bonding between people, a key ingredient in celebratory occasions and provides 'a symbol of togetherness' (Pettigrew, Ryan and Ogilvie, 2000: 71). The aim of this exploratory paper is to identify how young people perceive the social situations which they engage in which involve alcoholic consumption, with the objective of better understanding how their views correspond to notions of 'normal' and 'binge' drinking.

Doing Alcohol Consumption

While the macro issues of personal health and harm to oneself and others on the one side and the economic context of extensive alcohol marketing and de-regulation on the other, cannot be ignored, a better understanding of how young people are 'doing consumption' (Warde, 1994, p. 894) within the context of a culture of intoxication (Measham and Brain, 2005) is needed to go beyond the simplistic and problematic notion of binge drinking. An understanding of how alcohol is integrated into young people's consumption lives is required to theorise on the nature of their consumption practices within the broader contexts of the market place, consumer culture, social policy and individual decision making.

While there is recognition that the term binge drinking is unclear, emotive and politically charged, nevertheless it continues to be commonly used both in the popular press, government documents and research papers. Increasingly though research studies are using other terms to describe young people's modes of alcohol consumption including 'bounded hedonistic consumption' and 'rational hedonism' (Brain, 2000, p.7), 'determined drunkenness' (Measham, 2004b, p. 344), 'controlled loss of control' (Measham, 2004b, p. 343), 'calculated hedonism' (Bain, 2000, p.8) and 'heavy sessional consumption' (Measham, 2004a, p. 316). The meanings and implications associated with such alternative methods of describing young people's consumption behaviour in relation to alcohol may give a more useful insight into how they view drinking as part of their lives. Measham's (2004b) concept of 'controlled loss

of control' for example, is illustrated by Parker's (2003, p. 142) picture of young people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds trying to manage a 'work hard-play hard equilibrium'. While they consume alcohol (and drugs), this is largely a weekend activity where the function of their consumption is to 'chill out, de-stress, forget worries, feel self-confident and sociable and experience and enjoy the effects of substances in a social setting' (2003, p. 142). The parameters which set such controlled loss of control are similar to Brain's notion of 'bounded hedonistic consumption' (2000, p.7) where young people are carefully managing their behaviour and their bodies (Featherstone, 1991). Such drinking behaviour is a form of planned letting go which balances out the constrained behaviour they are subject to in the formal structures of everyday life in school, work and family. Importantly from a consumer research perspective, more investigation needs to be done to address our understanding of the differences in perspective between binge drinking and bounded hedonistic consumption. Is this just an issue of generational differences in perception or a useful dichotomy for serving different interests?

Method

This paper presents initial findings of how young people (aged 18-25) are doing alcohol consumption. Four semi structured focus groups of 6 to 7 were conducted in two different geographic locations (Birmingham, a major city in the centre of England, and Weston, a seaside town in the West of England). The findings form part of a larger project concerned with young people's social identity within the context of branded consumption and alcohol. The young people in this study were recruited through contacts with local colleges; the aim was to have a mix of participants in terms of gender, socio-economic representation and ethnic affiliation and in most cases they were friendship groups. The research was carried out by two 'younger' researchers with a view to putting participants at their ease when talking about their drinking behaviour. Participants were informed that they were to be involved in a project looking at their socializing activities and were encouraged to talk about what they liked to do on a night out. Not all of them drank alcohol. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded. The verbatim transcripts were interpreted using a translation of text approach (Hirschmann and Holbrook, 1992) where the interpretive account is developed through key phrases, metaphors and patterns of meaning (Thompson 1996). For this study we identified recurring themes around how drink was consumed, its role in socializing and any incidents and attitudes expressed that could give us a better understanding of how these young adults perceived their alcohol consumption practices. As exploratory research it is limited in terms of generalisability and is intended to give an insight into young people's alcohol consumption behaviour.

Findings

Socialising and drinking amongst the participants took many forms but binge drinking was not a term readily used. Some participants on occasion drank to excess but such drinking needs to be placed in a broader context of socializing. Drinking events are often informed by other factors with drinkers invoking their own limits and control mechanisms even if these may not conform to government guidelines:

Jeff: 'When I start to feel like I'm absolutely wasted, when I can hardly walk properly and that I'll change straight away to water, I won't carry on drinking'

While Jeff's behaviour may not correspond to received notions of 'normal' drinking, control is invoked and there is not total hedonistic abandonment.

Four interrelated drinking themes; 'chilling', 'weekend drinking', 'drinking games' and 'occasions' emerged. Chilling tends to be quiet drinking with friends while weekend drinking is more focused on getting drunk. Games can be voluntary or compulsory and can emerge from weekend drinking or particular occasions. They are usually undertaken amongst friends to add to the fun of the evening. The drinking occasions can be celebratory e.g. a stag or hen night or a birthday or they can be compensatory e.g. after a bad day at work or as the result of an ended relationship. Anna describes one drinking occasion involving a game amongst friends:

Anna: ' When we went to Newquay we were like, coz it was a hen weekend we were all dressed up as people from the army and before we went in the club we went on a bar crawl and like one of the girls had a whistle and if she blew it once all of you had to get on the floor, if she blew it twice you had to get off the floor, if she blew it four, like you had to stand to attention. '

Most themes reflect 'controlled loss of control' (Measham, 1994b, p.343), allowing people time out from the other pressures of their lives to socialise and form relationships:

Jeff: 'The weekend is a chance to blow off some steam like during college you can't really go out and enjoy yourself and at the weekend you get to blow off your steam, you get to loosen up a bit and say you're single it's a chance to pull a girl.'

Some of the young drinkers also recognised heavy drinking as part of a life stage which they will pass through, with drinking under age seen as a rite of passage:

Dan: ' When your parents don't want you to drink, you drink more. It's more of a rebellious thing and like when you can you don't seem to do it as much.'

Other participants reflected on the kinds of things they did when younger from the perspective of experience:

Dawn: ' Cos when I was like fifteen and I first started going out, you'd just be like, you would do silly things and like one of my mates she really needed a wee'

Tiffany: ' Yeah cos you dunno how it worked did ya.'

Dawn: Yeah and then she like, she couldn't wait for a wee she went on this under pass.'

Incidents such as these were thought comical but were also part of the narrative of being young and doing things that the older generation would frown upon. That young people need to distinguish themselves from the older generation in their activities is well documented (Hayward, 2004), yet a better understanding of what this may involve may help undermine the problematic-unproblematic dichotomy of some social policy and media discourse (Measham, 1994).

Socializing and 'chilling' with your friends was principally about having a relaxed time with people you know in an unthreatening environment. This form of drinking is sometimes juxtaposed with a more concerted form of consumption that may reflect a particular context such as going out with the rugby club:

Dan: 'Coz when you go out with your mates like it is about like having a drink but it's also about like just chilling out a little bit but with the rugby its about like drinking and that

Interviewer: Right, it's a bit more intense then is it?

Dan: Yeah, a bit more pressure as well I think

Interviewer: What pressure on you to drink

Dan: Yea no not to drink, just like to do stuff like you wouldn't normally do like more shorts or just stupid drinks really and just messing with each other like someone would fall asleep so we'd take their shoes off and like piss in their shoes.'

There were a number of incidents such as these recalled by participants; some were more threatening and dangerous but most involved childish fun and minor incidents. There was little reflection on the damage that drink might do to their physical health although most seemed to make their own risk assessment of situations. There was limited discussion of cause and effect, that drinking too much might lead to dangerous situations or ill health. In understanding how alcohol is integrated into young adult's lives the findings support concepts of 'controlled loss of control' and 'calculating hedonism'. Featherstone identifies calculating hedonism as reflecting that discipline and hedonism are no longer incompatible. The market place and consumer culture supports alcohol consumption, while social policy discourse expects individuals to make informed decisions and behave responsibly. Such calculated hedonism may be the response to this particular context.

Conclusions

The young people in this study did alcohol consumption in a number of ways ranging from quiet social drinking to disruptive drunken behaviour. Their alcohol consumption is a form of calculated hedonism which allows indulgence but is contained by time, space and social situation (Measham, 2004). The difference is between a discourse of cause and effect and compatibility. While social bodies concerned with health and education often present one type of behaviour leading to particular outcomes (e.g. work hard to get a good job; save to buy a house), the compatibility discourse presents a range of different and apparently contradictory possibilities of life which have to be managed; 'Discipline and hedonism are no longer seen as incompatible' (Featherstone, 1991, p.171) This is an important issue for better understanding young people's alcohol consumption given that they do not necessarily look at the longer term effect of their behaviour, say in relation to their health. Participants balanced the physical risk of drinking and the impact on their social and cultural credibility of losing control in a drunken state with the desire to have fun and a good time with their friends. This perceived compatibility needs to be better understood for the debate around young people and alcohol to move on. It is an important component in the decision making of these young people, and better understanding should help shape social policy communication and inform potential regulatory consideration in the liberalised alcohol market.

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