



Research paper

When is it OK to be drunk? Situational and cultural variations in the acceptability of visible intoxication in the UK and Norway



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ABSTRACT

Background: Research on norms regulating drunken behaviour has tended to focus on differences between different countries and cultures rather than variations within them. Here, we examine whether there are: (i) situation-specific differences in the acceptability of visible intoxication among students in the UK and Norway; (ii) whether there are situation-specific and overall differences in this regard between the two countries; and finally (iii) to what degree possible differences reflect individual characteristics such as use of alcohol, perceived harm of alcohol consumption, and broader value orientation.

Methods: Students at one British ($n = 473$) and one Norwegian ($n = 472$) university responded to a survey including a battery of questions assessing the acceptability of visible intoxication in different situations, such as with friends, with work colleagues, with family members, and situations where children are present. Data were also collected regarding alcohol consumption, perceived harms of alcohol consumption, and value orientation. Analyses of covariance were performed to assess patterns in the acceptability of visible intoxication across different situations, and the relative contributions of country, alcohol consumption, perceived harm of alcohol consumption and human values.

Results: In both countries, visible intoxication was rated as most acceptable in situations involving friends and colleagues. Students from both countries rated visible intoxication least acceptable in situations where children are present. However, both overall, and in situations where children or family members are present, acceptability of visible intoxication scores were higher in the UK than Norway. These differences persisted after control for other variables.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates large situational variation in acceptability of drunken behaviour, pointing to a fine-meshed set of norms regulating alcohol use and drunken behaviour within the two cultures, with the UK standing out as a more alcohol-liberal culture than Norway. Such differences underline how norms regulating drunken behaviour are culturally constituted.

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Introduction

Drinking occasions can give rise to seemingly chaotic and risky behaviour because they offer participants a “time out” from the demands and restrictions of everyday life (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, p. 90). Still, drunken transgressions are only acceptable “within-limits”; that is, however drunk you become, there are some limits you do not cross, some norms you do not breach (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, p. 67). Almost half a century after it

was presented, this argument by MacAndrew and Edgerton remains unchallenged within alcohol research (Källmén & Gustafson, 1998; Room, 2001), especially in studies of cross-cultural variation (e.g. Kuendig et al., 2008; Kuntsche, Rehm, & Gmel, 2004) and studies focusing on social interaction (e.g. Abbey, 2011; Sexton, 2001). However, variations in drunken behaviour within the same cultures have to a large degree been left unexplored (Abel & Plumridge, 2004).

Here we will narrow our focus to probably the most salient aspect of drunken behaviour: *visible intoxication*. Moral acceptance of intoxication is uncommon (Room, 2005, p. 149). Still, situational variation in the *acceptability of visible intoxication* is presumably larger than more widely condemned sexual or violent transgressions

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under similar circumstances. Therefore, visible intoxication can be a promising place to start when exploring intra-cultural or situational patterns in drunken behaviour. To examine the circumstances that may affect the acceptability of drunken behaviours, we have developed an instrument measuring the acceptability of visible intoxication in different situations, and put this to use in a survey of university students in the UK and Norway. By comparing the two countries we can separate culturally constituted patterns in the acceptability of visible intoxication from factors on the individual level.

Situational norms for drunken behaviour

Situational variation in norms regulating drinking and drunkenness may be due to differences between more established local drinking practices (Mäkelä, 1986; Monk & Heim, 2014, pp. 275–276). By participating in such drinking practices people may learn how to interpret and perceive the possibilities and limitations in a concrete drinking situation (Harnett, Thom, Herring, & Kelly, 2000; Østergaard, 2009), enabling them to spontaneously behave “within limits” and judge the behaviour of others (Haidt, 2001). Therefore, people often intuitively know that different norms for drunken behaviour are sanctioned for different categories of people in the context of different drinking practices (Fjær & Pedersen, 2015). Individuals may then seek out certain drinking practices – the contexts of situations – where temporarily excused transgressions may occur (Demant & Törrönen, 2011). Social situations are, accordingly, an appropriate unit of analysis in the study of drunken behaviour, in addition to the study of cultural and individual differences (for an alternative approach, see Abel & Plumridge, 2004).

Norms regulating drunken behaviour differ from those regulating the amount and frequency of drinking. The latter are often studied under the topic of “drinking norms” (e.g. Baer, Stacy, & Larimer, 1991; Borsari & Carey, 2003). An injunctive norm to drink (a certain amount) does not necessarily entail acceptance of visible intoxication (Fjær & Pedersen, 2015; MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, p. 17). Still, previous studies may provide some leads on relevant situational characteristics. Notably, drinking and drunkenness is more acceptable among friends than among colleagues, and unacceptable with children present (Caetano & Clark, 1999). Young people may also have an ambivalent relationship to drinking with their family; parents are often those who enforce limits on young people’s drinking (Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004). Drinking during a work day has commonly been seen as unacceptable in both the UK and Norway, yet many employees can expect colleagues to drink socially (Ames, Duke, Moore, & Cunradi, 2009). Alcohol is also increasingly used in the “grey area” between work and leisure, such as at work meetings, seminars and on business trips (Frone & Trinidad, 2014), further complicating the navigation between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour.

Focusing on visible intoxication as the most salient aspect of drunken behaviour, we should expect that if the norms regulating drunken behaviour are patterned, there should also be observable situational differences in norms regulating visible intoxication. One such pattern may be found by looking at these norms in situations where different types of people are present:

RQ1. Are there situation-specific differences in norms regulating visible intoxication, related to the presence of (i) friends, (ii) colleagues, (iii) family, and (iv) children?

Differences between the UK and Norway

In order to throw even more light on how situational variation in drunken behaviour is culturally constituted, we will compare

two countries usually classified as belonging to slightly different drinking cultures – the UK and Norway. Both countries belong to the cultural north on the north–south gradient in European drinking cultures. Here, binge drinking is more common than the frequent consumption of low quantities found in, for example, Mediterranean countries (Kuntsche et al., 2004). In both countries, about a third of drinking occasions among adolescents lead to intoxication (Babor et al., 2010, p. 35). Still, per capita consumption in Norway is only about two thirds of that in UK (WHO, 2014, pp. 228, 246). In the adult population, the proportion of drinking occasions that lead to intoxication and the prevalence of heavy episodic drinking are higher in the UK than in Norway (Babor et al., 2010, p. 35; WHO, 2014, pp. 228, 246). In both countries, alcohol use has decreased among young people after the turn of the century (HSCIC, 2015; Pedersen & von Soest, 2015a). Also, alcohol policy in Norway is exceptionally strict, and remains so despite shifting governments and changes in method of sale (Karlsson & Österberg, 2007). Despite explicit intentions to reform alcohol policy to reduce drinking-related problems in the UK, recent UK government policy has tended to go in a more liberal direction (Nicholls & Greenaway, 2015).

Although consumers in both countries share a tendency to binge, more situations may be perceived as possible drinking situations in the UK. Notably, there is a long British tradition for a popular pub culture, including varieties such as “child friendly” family pubs that offer play areas (Pratten, 2003). In contrast, bars are exclusively the domain of adults in Norway, with no drinking space equivalent to the British pub marketed to families. Although, in some Norwegian families, adults may drink alcohol when children are present, it is widely perceived as problematic (Pape, Rossow, & Storvoll, 2015).

If intra-cultural patterns in the norms regulating visible intoxication are culturally constituted, we should expect there to be observable differences between the two countries in the situation-specific norms regulating visible intoxication, with the UK being more liberal than Norway:

RQ2: Are there differences between the UK and Norway in the acceptability of visible intoxication, in the presence of (i) friends, (ii) colleagues, (iii) family, and (iv) children?

RQ3: Are there overall differences in the degree of acceptability of visible intoxication between the UK and in Norway?

Individual characteristics and human values

Findings reported in the drinking norms literature lead us to expect that gender and alcohol consumption levels will affect the acceptability of visible intoxication (Monk & Heim, 2014, p. 274). Students’ overestimation of the typical alcohol consumption of others is higher when the target is a man, compared to when the target is a woman (Lewis & Neighbors, 2004), and self-other discrepancy in injunctive and descriptive drinking norms is higher among women (Borsari & Carey, 2003). Studies have also shown a positive relationship between perceived normative consumption and respondents’ own consumption levels (Baer et al., 1991; Carey, Borsari, Carey, & Maisto, 2006).

More generally, alcohol norms are also embedded into broader sets of values (Fjær & Pedersen, 2015). Values are “trans-situational goals (...) that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or group” (Schwartz et al., 2012, p. 664). Shalom Schwartz developed a much used circumplex of 10 universal human values, where the values at the same side of the circular model are motivationally-related, or compatible, while being incompatible with those on the opposite side (Schwartz et al.,

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