



Masculinities and femininities of drinking in Finland, Italy and Sweden: Doing, modifying and unlinking gender in relation to different drinking places



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ABSTRACT

In this article we analyze how Finnish, Italian and Swedish men and women are doing, modifying and unlinking gender in relation to different drinking places and situations. In the study, Finland and Sweden represent the Nordic intoxication-oriented drinking cultures, whereas Italy, in turn, represents the Mediterranean meal drinking cultures. The data were collected in a similar way in Finland, Italy and Sweden from 2007 to 2010, covering four different age groups. From each country at least eight male and eight female groups were selected, i.e. two male and two female groups from each age group, one representing higher and the other lower social status professions. All focus groups were asked to interpret a set of pictures representing different kinds of drinking places and situations, such as a couple's moderate wine drinking at a sidewalk table, heavy drinking among men in a bus, and playful drinking among women while dancing. In the analysis we emphasize the flexibility of doing gender and the possibility of challenging conventional gender performances. We assume that doing gender is a multi-dimensional process mediated by structures, hierarchies, identities, situations and agency. Our analysis presents a mosaic repertoire of masculinities and femininities that change shape depending on how the place is seen in terms of a drinking space or situation. The masculinities and femininities are not reducible to any single hierarchy of dominant and subordinate masculinities and femininities. Rather, the doing, modifying and unlinking of masculinities and femininities vary by geographical area, age and/or education, as well as by drinking situation.

1. Introduction

Globally the use of alcohol has functioned as one of the most significant signs of gendered identities (Holmila and Raitasalo, 2005). Traditionally male drinking has symbolized a masculinity that is associated with transgressive behavior, with building masculine ties, group loyalty, male honor, aggression against competing groups, and violence in intimate relationships (Graham and Wells, 2003). Female drinking, in turn, has conventionally connoted a threat to femininity, with a belief that drinking makes women act like men, exposes them to wanton sexual behavior and rape, and threatens their management of domestic and childcare duties (de Visser and McDonnell, 2012). Furthermore, women have traditionally had a duty to control men's drinking (de Visser and McDonnell, 2012, p. 619). The media has played a central role in maintaining and strengthening the above-described gender stereotypes in drinking (Roumeliotis and Törrönen, 2014) and even new social media seems to reproduce rather than

challenge them (Rolando et al., 2015).

In this article we use focus groups to investigate how women and men of different ages from Finland, Sweden and Italy are doing, modifying and unlinking masculinities and femininities in relation to different drinking situations, such as sharing a glass of wine at a sidewalk table in a public space, binge drinking with beer while traveling, and drinking and dancing in a social space within an urban night time economy.

A comparison of Scandinavian and Mediterranean regional areas, one with an intoxication-oriented drinking culture and the other with a moderate wine drinking tradition, provides an interesting platform from which to approach the doing of masculinities and femininities of drinking. In the last decades in Finland and Sweden, the share of women's drinking has risen and since the 1990s the frequency of binge drinking has grown considerably among women (Kühlhorn and Björ, 1998; Mäkelä et al., 2012). In Italy, again, female drinking has for a long time been a normal part of the meal drinking culture around wine

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consumption. Lately, experimentation with intoxication has also become more popular among girls (Beccaria, 2010).

In the article we show how our interviewees enact masculinities and femininities that vary between geographical areas and drinking situations, as well as change shape and relevance depending on the way the interviewees orientate to drinking. In some drinking situations, gender might be relevant and highlighted, in another, gender might be less relevant, downplayed or subverted. Furthermore, the article shows how place, situation and space are not ‘passive backdrops’ to the doing, modifying and unlinking of drinking masculinities and femininities, but are active constituents in their construction or deconstruction (Jayne et al., 2012, p. 214). We demonstrate how women and men of different ages from Finland, Sweden and Italy associate externally similar settings with diverse gendered social situations, spaces, identities and activities. Thus while focus group interviewees are doing, modifying and unlinking masculinities and femininities, they are also doing, modifying and unlinking places.

2. Drinking places and gendered patterns of alcohol consumption

Since the 1960s alcohol consumption has tripled in Finland and doubled in Sweden. At the same time women’s share of total consumption has increased. Nowadays, women account for some 30% of the total consumption in Sweden (Kühlhorn and Björ, 1998) and about 25% in Finland (Mäkelä et al., 2012). In Italy, alcohol consumption has gone down since the 1970s such that in the early 2000s it converged with the level of alcohol consumption in Finland and Sweden. The downward consumption has meant a decrease in daily meal drinking among men and women, with an increase in occasional and out of meals drinking in the evening. In Italy, in turn, alcohol consumption by women constitutes about half that of men (Allamani et al., 2010), and since the 1980s, the number of female drinkers has decreased (Voller, 2007). However, female heavy episodic drinking has lately become more common among young women (ISTAT, 2015).

Even though female drinking has increased or female inebriation has become more common in the countries under study (Kühlhorn and Björ, 1998; Mäkelä et al., 2012), there is still a strong double standard applied to women’s alcohol consumption (Holloway et al., 2009, p. 822). While performances of masculinity through public (heavy) drinking have traditionally been viewed as an acceptable behavior for men and boys, the public drinking performances of women and girls have repeatedly aroused public anxiety (MacLean, 2016). The studies show that in media representations, women are usually, for example, expected to be good mothers (Bogren, 2011), chaste in their sexual life (Meyer, 2010), keen on safeguarding their fertility (Day et al., 2004), and polite and considerate in their social relations (Jackson and Tinkler, 2007).

How gender is done in drinking varies by place and situation, as well as by how these places and situations are understood as social spaces. The studies demonstrate, for example, that the sites of night-time economy, such as bars and clubs, provide places to perform alternative femininities that may or may not challenge asymmetrical gendered power relations. According to Tan (2013, p. 720), clubs can act for young women as a space “that encourages the bold expression of female (hetero)sexuality that would otherwise be pathologized in other public spaces”. In club spaces, female performances can be characterized as affective, flirtatious, hypersexual, and multiple, as these places also allow the enactment of bisexual female desire. The study by Waitt et al. (2011), again, reveals that young women may use clubs and bars as places to territorialize for themselves a space of privacy that is grounded in feminine elements of belonging and in which they feel confident of doing tipsy or drunken femininities. Even though these femininities may resemble the masculinities of becoming ‘slaughtered’ (Tomsen, 1997), they have little to do with gender equality or with becoming like men. Rather, when doing tipsy or drunken femininities, young women momentarily transgress conventional and middle-class norms of respectable femininity (Tomsen, 1997, pp. 271–272). More-

over, the research by Stepney (2014) specifies that in the evenings out within the night-time economy, young women may struggle with ambivalent emotions, as they expect unflinching friendship so as to feel safe when drinking and getting drunk, yet aim to take distance from friendship, so as not to be too close and intimate, in order to be able to have fun and be playful.

Stag tours and bachelorette parties provide other kinds of rituals and spaces to perform alternative femininities or masculinities. According to Thurnell-Read (2011), in stag tours young men may perform masculinities that temporally oppose the traditional masculine expectations to uphold a rational, controlled and bounded body. By uncontrolled drunkenness in stag tours they unbound their bodies to engage in transgressive and messy acts, including public nudity, urination and vomiting. Their momentary release from constraint “is fostered by and works in tandem with more controlled and contained embodiments in other settings” (Thurnell-Read, 2011, p. 989). The study by Montemurro and McClure (2005) shows, correspondingly, that in bachelorette parties, young women often do their femininity in opposition to their everyday femininities. Within this context they allow themselves to engage in heavy drinking and bad behavior, and do not feel shame about it.

There are also studies that examine how drinking femininity is performed in rural spaces. For example, the research by Leyshon (2008, p. 284) reveals that in the context of the countryside, where conventional femininities dominate, “there is rather a limited range of possible identity positions available for women”. Despite this, in the pubs in the countryside young women were able to perform new kinds of femininities by consuming beer and by forming mutual female-centered drinking bonds.

Furthermore, there are some studies on how gender is undone in the media representations of alcohol (e.g. Bogren, 2011) or in the context of people’s own accounts concerning their drinking (e.g. Tan, 2013; Waitt et al., 2011). Often women’s increased drinking has been explained as a process where women adopt masculine drinking styles (Holmila and Raitasalo, 2005). However, as recent studies reviewed above demonstrate, it may rather be a process where women are undoing traditional male, as well as female, drinking practices by developing new kinds of drinking femininities (Waitt et al., 2011; Stepney, 2014) and masculinities (Tan, 2013).

We can identify two lacunae in the field of studies on the masculinities and femininities of drinking. First, there are only a few studies that examine drinking masculinities and femininities together. These studies show, for example, that cultural links between heavy drinking and masculinity or wine drinking and femininity have weakened (e.g. Demant and Törrönen, 2011). Typically, studies on gender and drinking habits have concentrated on either drinking masculinities or drinking femininities separately. These studies indicate that the long-term increase in women’s drinking along with a general change in gender identifications have contested the masculine hegemony in drinking and have led to drinking patterns being more diverse and heterogeneous within and across gender groups (e.g. Törrönen and Roumeliotis, 2014). The examination of drinking masculinities and femininities together as a comparative undertaking would make it easier to identify how men and women may adopt both masculine and feminine elements into their drinking styles from a mixture of local, national and global influences and blend them flexibly into new kinds of hybrid drinking styles that are sensitive to expectations of different drinking situations, as well as contributing to constructing these drinking situations as specific kinds of spaces.

Secondly, the studies on drinking masculinities or femininities have typically investigated singular sub-groups such as club-goers or age groups, especially youth drinking, as clearly demonstrated by the review above of the existing literature. As such, the comparison of different cross-sectional groups’ masculinities and femininities or the generational dynamic in doing masculine or feminine drinking has remained understudied.

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