



Youth, alcohol and place-based leisure behaviours: A study of two locations in England



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 19 February 2013

Keywords:

Youth
Alcohol
Drinking
Social practice

ABSTRACT

Excessive alcohol consumption among young people in England regularly features in national media and has been a focus of recent academic research and government policy. Though the majority of young people do not regularly drink excessively, heavy sessional drinking – ‘binge’ drinking – is associated with negative health and social consequences for those who do. Alcohol-related health problems in young people are not spread consistently across England, however, and while there are significant intra-regional differences, northern regions fare worse overall than those in the south. This paper draws on an 18-month project which explored differences in the physical, social and regulatory environments (highlighted by previous research as influential) in two locations with contrasting alcohol harm profiles. The paper focuses on the lives of 15–16 year olds and examines potential differences that influence behaviour at this crucial age; and in particular issues that might presage risky and/or harmful drinking in young adulthood. The study examines evidence from young people themselves (activity diaries and interviews); stakeholder interviews; and observation analysis. The study finds social practices in the two areas to be largely similar; moreover, the collectivised and social nature of alcohol consumption suggests sources of influence from a wider context, beyond immediate family and friendship groups. However these social practices were acted out in locations with very different physical characteristics, in particular these related to the availability of non-alcohol focused leisure activities and the spatial arrangement/visibility of adult drinking culture.

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Introduction

Drinking alcohol among young people in England is highlighted in political rhetoric, academic research and popular media coverage. Heavy drinking in crowded, town and city centre bars is associated with anti-social behaviour, violence and injury (Hadfield & Measham, 2011; Hobbs, Winslow, Hadfield, & Lister, 2005; Jones, Hughes, Atkinson, & Bellis, 2011; Livingstone, Chikritzhs, & Room, 2007; Measham & Brain, 2005). Though the majority of young people do not regularly drink excessively and young male drinking has been declining (Plant & Plant, 2006; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009), heavy sessional (binge) drinking is normalised for large numbers of young people, with associated negative health and social consequences (Bellis & Hughes, 2011; Jefferson, Jones, & Bellis, 2007; National Audit Office, 2008). However, the negative effects of alcohol are not spread consistently across England. The North West Public Health Observatory (NWPHO), for example, tracks a number

of indicators of health related harms from alcohol; they are in turn used to produce Local Alcohol Profiles for England (LAPE) scores. These show that while there are significant intra-regional differences, northern regions overall fair much worse than the southeast (Deacon, Hughes, Tocque, & Bellis, 2007; North West Public Health Observatory, 2011).

Youth drinking behaviours in England

While underage drinking is of concern in England, the proportion of 11 to 15-year-olds who drink alcohol has been declining: 45% in 2011 compared to 61% in 2003 (Fuller, 2011). However, by the age of 15–16 years many teenagers are drinking regularly and a quarter to excess (Fuller, 2011; Jefferson et al., 2007). While young people across Europe start drinking at about the same age (12), overall consumption rates for teenagers in England are high in comparison with most European countries (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006; Currie et al., 2008; Hibell et al., 2009; McArdle et al., 2002). Underage drinking carries a number of risks for young people, with increased likelihood of alcohol related injuries (Velleman, 2009); behavioural issues (McArdle, 2008; Taylor, Malone, Iacono, &

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McGue, 2002); poor mental health (Newbury-Birch et al., 2009); and adult dependency and social problems in later life (Hingson, Heeren, & Winter, 2006; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003; Viner & Taylor, 2007). Furthermore, alcohol consumption at a young age is linked to other risky behaviours, such as unprotected, or regretted sex (Bellis et al., 2009; Hibell et al., 2009) and being involved in violence and/or crime (Bellis et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2008; Matthews, Brasnett, & Smith, 2006).

Environmental influences on youth drinking cultures

In seeking to explain the relationship between environment and behaviour, Gibson's work in the field of environmental psychology suggests the concept of 'affordances' (Gibson, 1979). Affordances are physical and social environments that are recognised by the observer as being of significance to them (Heft, 2010). The concept of affordances provides a way of studying both the characteristics of environments and the behavioural reaction individuals have to them and is particularly useful in explaining the socio-cultural contexts in which behaviour is situated (Heft, 1989). The concept has been used to explore children's play and engagement within home, neighbourhood and outdoor environments (Clark & Uzzell, 2002; Heft, 1988; Kytta, 2002), although it has been less applied in relation to older groups. A distinction has been drawn between free and 'promoted' action in relation to affordances, the latter referring to behaviour shaped and modified particularly by the action of 'others' and what is culturally defined as acceptable (Reed, 1993); this is apt in relation to alcohol consumption given the extent to which such consumption is controlled and regulated. The concept of affordances, and the social life of teenagers being an amalgam of affordances bounded by physical and regulatory environments, therefore, provided the departure point for the study (Fig. 1).

While the concept of affordances provided a useful starting point, however, it was acknowledged that the concept has undergone more advanced development in relation to physical environments than social ones. Given that the consumption of alcohol is patterned through numerous habits, cultural practices and rituals (Jayne et al., 2006) it was felt that the research would benefit by engaging with broader debates on social practices. Here the writings of Bourdieu provided inspirational and in particular the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990, 2005). While stopping short of an exploration of habitus in its entirety, the research was shaped so as to consider important dimensions of the concept and in particular notions of 'dispositions' and 'embodied' behaviour. The first of these was the subject of different dispositions in relation to youth drinking practices and the need to consider these within the context of leisure practices as a whole. It underpinned the

desirability of trying to study groups of similar social space, in other words, similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Furthermore habitus emphasises the extent to which social practices are embodied within behaviour, which would provide a challenge to capturing them within an empirical study.

Grounding itself in these two key concepts (affordance and habitus), the research posited that the social environment in which young people develop their social practices is not only an amalgam of affordances, but also a socio-cultural world which they inhabit and which shapes what they do (habitus). Following this the subsequent section addresses where young people drink, and the social setting of alcohol consumption and its regulations as embodiments, or manifestations, of environmental influences.

Regulation and diversion

Successive governments have attempted to change British drinking culture through regulatory initiatives (Roberts & Eldridge, 2009; Valentine, Holloway, & Jayne, 2010). Recently enacted laws and initiatives have been particularly aimed at kerbing underage consumption and public disorder. These have targeted individual drinkers, licensed venues and areas of towns associated with problem youth drinking (Hadfield & Measham, 2011). However, while frameworks to tackle youth drinking are set at national level, the government's current alcohol strategy emphasises local innovation to address local issues (HM Government, 2012). Furthermore, the extent to which there is 'local and regional divergence in interpretation' has been highlighted (Hadfield & Measham, 2011, p. 43). While nationally there is evidence to suggest that initiatives have reduced direct sales to under-18s, to date information on local variations is limited to government promotion of exemplar projects (Newlove, 2012).

More generally evidence on reducing youth alcohol intake has addressed diversionary activity. A UK focused meta-review in particular highlighted involvement in sports and extra-curricular activities as associated with reduced alcohol intake and a delay in starting to drink until late adolescence (Velleman, 2009); although previous work in the US has associated being involved with a sports team and problem drinking (Miller et al., 2003). This suggests a complex relationship between healthy and health-risk behaviours in this age group.

Where young people drink

The use of parks and open greenspace also illustrates the complexities around the teenage health/health risk relationship. Active and passive engagement in greenspace is essentially positive for human health (De Vries, 2010); however drinking outdoors and unsupervised in parks (and other open spaces) has been identified as a specifically 'risky' behaviour indulged in by teenagers (Coleman & Cater, 2005; Newburn & Shiner, 2001; Pavis, CunninghamBurley, & Amos, 1997). Currently 29% of 15 year olds drink outside in parks, or similar locations (Fuller, 2011) and recent work has highlighted the importance of open spaces to teenage groups of drinkers (Percy, Wilson, McCartan, & McCrystal, 2011). Outdoor drinking requires a source of alcohol and while nearly half of teenagers who drink also buy their own supplies (Fuller, 2011), proxy purchase is significant in outdoor consumption, that is, loitering around convenience stores/off-licences and approaching third parties to make the purchase – a behaviour which carries its own risks (Parker, 2007). The specificities of open space drinking are poorly understood, however, and studies focussing on outdoor drinking culture are rare.

Young people over the legal drinking age (18) in England are more likely to drink in youth-orientated pubs and clubs in town and city centres and the expansion of such venues, along with their



Fig. 1. Social life of teenagers (inspired by Barton and Grant's Settlement Health Map, 2006).

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