Research Paper

Reconfiguring the violent encounter? Preloading, security staff and breathalyser use in the night-time economy

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ABSTRACT

Background: In a culture of preloading and late-night licenses, alcohol-related violence remains a persistent problem for police and public health. Understood as a ritualized 'micro-social' interaction (Collins 2009a, 2009b), entry into bars and clubs is a particular flashpoint for violence between bouncers/door staff and customers.

Methods: A police-led initiative to deter excessive drunkenness and preloading using hand-held breathalysers (the #RU2Drunk scheme) was investigated from the perspective of security and bar staff using the devices. Interviews (n = 18 + 12), a focus group with security staff (n = 22) and a focus group with a security company (n = 3) were conducted in two seaside towns in the South-West of England, UK. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted.

Findings: Door staff emphasised the normality of 'determined drunkenness' and associated violence in their working lives. Breathalyser use appeared to disrupt the 'ritual' of the violent encounter by reconfiguring it into an interaction between customer and technology. This depersonalized the judgement about who was 'too drunk' to enter the venue, with the more discretionary nature of who to breathalyse hidden from customers. Other door staff found it less useful and saw it as a challenge to their authority and expertise. At a managerial level there was concern about the transfer of responsibility for policing the night time economy (NTE).

Conclusion: There is potential to reconfigure the violent encounter for door staff using breathalyser devices. However, this is more likely to succeed where other structural limits (e.g. restrictions on late licenses) are in place, and as part of wider policy initiatives to reconfigure the alcohol-saturated NTE leisure scene.

Introduction

Breathalysers have been the centrepiece of drink-driving legislation for the past 50 years (Tunbridge & Harrison, 2017). This paper considers a different application of their use: their voluntary adoption on the doors of bars and clubs within the night-time economy (NTE). Statistical analysis of crime data suggests such breathalyser initiatives may promote moderate drinking and result in less violence (Boyd, Farrimond, & Ralph, 2018). This paper examines these initiatives from the perspective of those using the breathalysers; bouncers/door staff and management. Of particular focus is the potentially violent encounter between door staff and patrons, understood as a ritualized 'micro-social' interaction (Collins 2009a, 2009b), in which heavy alcohol consumption, preloading, and challenges to identity or loss of face are all theorized to play a role. Drawing on data from two relatively impoverished seaside towns in the South-West of England where

a breathalyser scheme (#RU2Drunk) was implemented, we consider the question of whether breathalysers have the potential to disrupt the ritual and 'reconfigure' the violent encounter.

Alcohol in the night-time economy

Alcohol-related violence is a pervasive feature of the NTE in the UK. Seventy percent of violence on weekends and in the evening/night-time period is attributed to drink (Office for National Statistics, 2015). The UK has a long and complex history of public drunkenness, violence, and politics (Nicholls, 2009; Talbot, 2009). In particular, the liberalization of the licensing laws early in the 21st century produced what has been termed a 'binge and brawl' culture (Measham & Brain, 2005). In the era of alco-pops, social media marketing of alcohol, and 24 h licenses, excessive or 'binge-drinking' is not a by-product of a night out but an end-goal, with drinkers pursuing 'an apparently deliberate and determined

drunkenness' (Measham & Brain, 2005, p. 273). Young people's leisure pursuits consist of a very tightly defined and homogenized set of consumer practices, namely competitive weekend 'circuit drinking', as well as illegal drug use (Winlow & Hall, 2006; de Visser, Wheeler, Abraham, & Smith, 2013). As such, heavy drinking and bingeing can be understood as a form of 'calculated hedonism' in which pleasure is prioritised for fear of 'missing out' (Szmigin et al., 2008; Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Hackley, & Mistral, 2011).

Although such hedonistic practices look 'uncontrolled' and devoid of restraint, the opposite is true. The current UK NTE is built around drinking, facilitated by policy-makers and local planners regenerating town and city centres in a post-industrial phase of urban development (Hobbs, Lister, Hadfield, Winlow, & Hall, 2000; Hobbs, Winlow, Lister, & Hadfield, 2003). However, alcohol consumption, and the culture of 'hedonism' with which it is associated, comes at a price: social disorder, alcohol-related violence, and anti-social behaviour. This has been labelled 'deviant leisure' (Smith & Raymen, 2018), on the basis that alcohol-related violence is structurally afforded within the consumer NTE. For example, problematic excessive drinking accounts for 69% of the alcohol industry's profits. Thus, concurring with other sociologists writing about the NTE (Winlow & Hall, 2006; Hobbs et al. 2003), Smith & Raymen argue 'the violence of the night-time economy is not shocking and nonsensical, but rather predictable' (2016, p.8). This does not mean all excessively drunk people are violent. On any given occasion, most are not (Collins, 2009b). Nevertheless, excessive drunkenness, coupled with the suspension of non-violent norms as a form of 'carousing' (Collins, 2009b) or 'carnivalesque' (Haydock, 2016) creates a situational potential for violence. Tensions exist, therefore, for planners and policy-makers, who on the one hand need to promote free-market licensing to encourage trade, yet also need to manifest 'tough' policies on crime and disorder (Roberts, 2006).

Preloading

Policy attention has focused recently on the practices of 'pre-drinking' ('prinking') or 'preloading' and its connection with violence (Wells, Graham, & Purcell, 2009). Those who have been pre-drinking are more likely to drink heavily (more than 20 units per session) and 2.5 times more likely to get into a fight (Hughes et al., 2008). Preloading is not a new practice: people have always drunk alcohol at home before heading out. What is different, however, are a multiple set of factors which make preloading now even more integral to a night out in the UK drinking scene, so that it typically follows a 'home-pub-club' pattern (Wells et al., 2009). This includes permission for early morning or 24 h licenses so that people are able to enter the NTE much later than previously (Wells et al., 2009). There is also the comparative cheapness and high accessibility of supermarket alcohol (Forsyth, 2006) which allows young adults to avoid the high cost of drinks in the NTE (Wells et al., 2009). In line with Smith & Raymen's analysis, it is arguable therefore, that 'preloading' is structurally facilitated by current alcohol policy (e.g. cheap supermarket alcohol and the resistance to a minimum pricing unit (MPU)). However, this is not the only motivation. Pre-drinkers report drinking at home as an opportunity for social bonding (Foster & Ferguson, 2014), to gain alcohol-induced confidence before entering the night-time sphere (Barton & Husk, 2014), and to reduce the risk of spiked drinks when out, a concern of women in particular (Ritchie, Ritchie, & Ward, 2009). Preloading is thus both structurally and culturally facilitated within the current UK night-time sphere. It creates problems for policing which, whilst facing reduced resources, needs to cover longer drinking hours (Humphreys et al., 2013). It also makes the doors of licensed premises a 'flashpoint' for aggression and violence (Barton & Husk, 2012). Handling these potentially violent encounters is the responsibility of private security firms; the informal 'containers' of public disorder in the liberalized NTE (Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2002; Hobbs et al., 2003).

Theorizing the violent encounter

This paper draws on the work of Collins (Collins 2009a, 2009b) to make sense of the potentially violent encounter between the public and bouncers, in particular the 'encounter' on the door of the venue. This is where the customer moves from the public sphere of the street into the bouncers' jurisdiction and the private space of the pub or club. Collins argues that generally violence can be understood as a 'micro-socio-logical' interaction in situations in which there is heightened tension and fear. Contrary to other readings of the NTE as a place of constant violence, Collins points out that actual violence as opposed to threatened 'boasting and bluster' is not that common (p. 345). It occurs when one person or a group break through the usual pro-social interactions to overcome their fear and launch a verbal or physical attack. The 'pathway' of aggression in the NTE is one of ritualized 'fighting with rules'. During 'carousing', the collective emotional energy is high, and anyone attempting to disrupt that (e.g. police breaking up groups, bouncers checking patrons on the door) can be subject to violence.

Ethnographic accounts of door work has suggested that being able to 'control the door', by vetting customers and preventing entry, is seen as a fundamental principle of being a good bouncer because of the potential to prevent 'trouble' before it starts (Hobbs et al., 2003). Bouncers establish their authority to make decisions on who is allowed in through multiple ways, such as their large physical capital (Monaghan, 2002) and their techniques of control (e.g. spatially moving customers where they want them) (Hobbs et al., 2003). However, excluding individuals or groups from collective enjoyment is fraught with tension, as patrons may perceive bouncers' decisions as 'unfair' (Collins, p. 259). Indeed, the enactment of this decision-making often reproduces class and ethnicity inequalities, excluding visible ethnic minority men (Søgaard, 2017) and/or working-class/lower-income groups with preference for 'consumer elites' (Hadfield, 2008; Measham & Hadfield, 2009). Public rejection on the door can provoke fears of a 'loss of face', particularly for males concerned with maintaining a traditional masculine identity in front of their friends (Lindsay, 2012), although this gendered encounter can be reconstituted in different ways with women drinking heavily and an increasing number of female door staff (Rickett & Roman, 2012; Hobbs, O'Brien, & Westmarland, 2007). The potentially 'violent encounter' between bouncer and customer can therefore be understood as a dramatic event, often with spectators and driven not only by excessive alcohol consumption, but also by heightened emotion and threatened identity.

Breathalyser use to deter violence

The repurposing of breathalysers, traditionally used for policing drink-driving, on the doors of licensed premises, constitutes a new preventive tool within night-time governance. Although initiated by local police, it is enacted by door and bar staff who are responsible for meeting the Licensing Act (2003)'s stipulation not to serve drunk individuals. Breathalyser schemes fit within wider policy approaches to deter alcohol-related violence. First, it is an alcohol harm reduction scheme as it aims to encourage 'moderate drinking' rather than abstinence. Limits on the breathalyser are set at more than twice the current British drink-drive limit rather than at zero. As such, it fits within wider national and international policies to tackle the harms of alcohol use and promote moderate, healthier and safer drinking, within the context of well-developed and industry driven legal alcohol cultures (e.g. National Alcohol Strategy Working Group, Canada, 2007; Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, Australia, 2006). Second, in its use of technology to assess drunkenness, it sits within a wider suite of surveillance used to monitor social disorder. The UK NTE is heavily regulated by such technology, for example, CCTV (Coleman & Sim, 2000), identification schemes (Haggerty & Tokar, 2012) and, as with many other countries, increasing use of body cameras within policing (Coudert, Butin, & Le Métayer, 2015). It can be argued, therefore, that