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'You're repulsive': Limits to acceptable drunken comportment for young adults

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ABSTRACT

Background: Researchers have described a 'culture of intoxication' among young people. Yet drunkenness remains a socially risky practice with potential to evoke emotions of irritation and even disgust. We consider intoxicated practices that young adults in Melbourne, Australia, described as distasteful, to identify contemporary cultural forces that constrain intoxication and limit how it is enacted.
Method: Interviews were conducted with 60 participants in Melbourne, Australia, each with recent drinking experience. Participants were asked to provide accounts of moments when they regarded their own or others' drunken comportment as unsociable or unpleasant. Transcripts were analysed to identify recurrent themes.
Results: Despite amusement when recounting drunken antics, almost everyone in the study identified some discomfort at their own or other's drunkenness. We describe four interacting domains where lines delineating acceptable comportment appear be drawn. The first concerns intoxicated *practices*. Unpleasant drunken comportment often entailed a sense that the drunk person had disturbed others through an overflow of the self – extruding intimacy, sexuality, violence or bodily fluids. The second domain was *gendering*, with women vulnerable to being regarded as sexually inappropriate, and men as threatening. Third, the *settings* where intoxicated behaviour occurred influenced whether intoxicated people risked censure. Finally, the *relationships* between the drunk person and others, including their respective social positions and drinking patterns, shaped how they were perceived.
Conclusion: The capacity of alcohol to render people more open to the world is both sought and reviled. It is important to recognise that there remain limits on acceptable drunken comportment, although these are complex and contingent. These limits are enforced via people's affective responses to drunkenness. This is form of alcohol harm reduction that occurs outside of public health intervention. Thus, cultures that constrain drinking should be supported wherever it is possible to do so without reinforcing stigmatising identities.

1 Introduction

The past decade has seen a burgeoning literature on the imperatives many young people feel to seek alterity through alcohol and other substance use (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009; Pennay & Moore, 2010; Pennay, 2012). Researchers have described a culture of intoxication among young people that is constituted though the night time economy and alcohol promotions, arguing that heavy alcohol and drug use has become normalised (Measham & Brain, 2005). This literature describes hedonistic and carnivalesque pleasures of heavy drinking.

Yet drinking to intoxication remains a socially risky practice with potential to evoke emotions of irritation and even disgust in both drinkers themselves and those around them. Behaving too unpleasantly and doing this too many times taints a person's self-image and social reputation. Social censure against alcohol use is evident where people drink in settings (such as at work or when caring for young children) where cultural norms dictate that they should be sober (Simonen, Törrönen, & Tigerstedt, 2014; Törrönen & Roumeliotis, 2014). Women are in a particularly invidious

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situation when it comes to appropriate drunken comportment. While young women in societies such as present-day Australia are expected to display gregarious sociability when drinking, they are judged harshly if they lose control to the point where they appear overly sexually available (De Crespigny & Vincent, 1999; Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2013). The damage of uncontrolled alcohol use to an individual's social standing is particularly evident in the stigma associated with being labelled as an alcoholic (Schomerus et al., 2011).

Some studies have explored how people limit or 'stage' alcohol use to achieve a moderate rather than an acute level of intoxication (Lindsay, 2009; Lyons, Emslie, & Hunt, 2014; Zajdow & MacLean, 2014). Yet despite the attention given to young people's drinking, and public concern about cultures or circumstances that encourage people to drink to excess, relatively little academic attention has been given to identifying culturally embedded ideas and practices that encourage people to limit or avoid intoxication, or to behave more sociably when they drink. This information is important for two reasons. First, attempting to identify cultural limits to intoxicated bad behaviour contributes to our understanding of how and why young people organise and limit their drinking. Second, these limits may function to reduce harm from alcohol use. Duff (2004, 391) has suggested that the social norms that exist within networks (particularly the stigma around 'messy' substance use) have set the grounds for 'active limit-setting' and the promotion of more moderate forms of consumption. Existing cultural frames that limit intoxication and moderate drunken comportment must be understood if they are to be reinforced, or at least not disrupted, through public health campaigns.

In 1969, MacAndrew and Edgerton argued that intoxicated behaviours are not simply a function of the pharmacological effects of alcohol, but that social norms also shape how people act when they drink. In other words, alcohol does not simply act on bodies; people also enact drunkenness through sets of practices that are recognisable as manifestations of being drunk within the specific social contexts of their lives. But while MacAndrew and Edgerton regarded alcohol use as excusing behaviours which would be interpreted as unsociable in a sober person, they recognised that drunkenness was not a license for any behaviour at all. In any given circumstance, there will be a range of drunken practices which fall outside what they termed the 'within-limits clause' (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969).

Although MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) identified the existence of upper boundaries of toleration of drunken comportment, their focus was on cultural variation in what was tolerated, with little attention to describing how the outside limit was defined and how behaviour that transgressed this limit was censured. In this paper we explore how drinkers aged 18–24 in Melbourne, Australia, negotiate the far verge of the 'within limits' clause for acceptable drunken comportment, identifying four domains where lines delineating acceptable comportment appear be drawn. We conclude by indicating how limits to drunken comportment may be theorised nearly half a century after McAndrew and Edgerton: as guided by primarily by affective responses rather than rules. We also indicate the possible implications of reinforcing stigmatising drinking practices for health campaigns.

2 Method

The analysis here draws on qualitative interviews conducted in 2012 with 60 people living in Melbourne aged 18–24 who had consumed at least one alcoholic drink within the previous six months. The study was designed to provide insights into subcultures and practices that frame young adults' alcohol consumption. Ethical approval was obtained from two universities (see Acknowledgements).

Equal numbers of women and men were recruited via advertisements placed at local tertiary education institutions, at agencies providing services for young people, and through word of mouth. Two-thirds of the participants were employed full or part time and six were neither studying nor working. Reflecting contemporary Australian multiculturalism, 17 were born outside Australia and 19 spoke a language in addition to English. Participants were offered the choice of completing interviews on their own (n = 35), or with one (n = 16) or two (n = 9) friends.

Three experienced researchers conducted interviews using a detailed theme sheet. A brief survey was administered to each participant to establish demographic characteristics and alcohol consumption patterns. Although the sample was accessed through convenience methods, their demographic characteristics and, importantly, their drinking patterns, broadly resembled participants of the same age in a representative survey sample (MacLean & Callinan, 2013).

During interviews we asked how participants felt when they saw someone who was really drunk and whether there had ever been a time when they had regretted something they had done while intoxicated. To ensure all relevant comments were included in the analysis, we reviewed the transcripts for descriptions of drunkenness that were regarded as negative in any way. Transcripts were analysed thematically and coded in two phases, reflecting descriptive and analytic representation of data (Wolcott, 1994). As part of this we paid close attention to participants' choice of words, seeking to understand the implications of metaphors used to describe drunken practices. All the names used here are pseudonyms.

We include participants' reflections both on their own drunken comportment and on that of others in our analysis, because, as we shall show, we regard the two as mutually constitutive. Participants often forgave others' intoxicated infractions on the basis that they had done similar things themselves. At the same time they regulated their own behaviour at least in part through their responses to enactions of intoxication by friends and strangers.

3 Practices, gendering, settings and relationships of drunken comportment

In organising the data, we were informed by the work of Mol (2012), who argues that the body is not a coherent and consistent entity, retaining its integrity as it moves through the world. Rather, the body emerges in different guises according to the 'settings, practices, situations' where it is located. With this in mind, we identified four interrelated domains where drunken bodies became distasteful (to young adults themselves, as well as to others around them), generating feelings of dislike, disgust and shame. We term these the *practices*,*gendering*, *settings* and *relationships* of drunken comportment.

3.1 Practices of drunken comportment

In our participants' accounts, drunken comportment was adjudicated largely according to the nature of the practices enacted. When reflecting both on their own behaviour and that of others, participants spoke of excessive intimacy, displays of sexuality, of violence and of vomiting, as disturbing, particularly when a person did these things frequently.

Interviewees in the study drew a sharp distinction between drinking that led to life-threatening crises, such as a car accident, and the more everyday problems or irritations that occur around people who are drunk. They were also careful to differentiate normal drinking from that which signified an addiction, as has