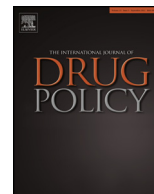




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Research paper

# The pleasures of drunken one-night stands: Assemblage theory and narrative environments

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In this study, we use assemblage theory to investigate the link between alcohol use and one-night stands.

**Methods:** The data come from qualitative interviews conducted with 104 young participants in the night-time economy.

**Results:** We show that: (i) alcohol-fuelled *sexual explorations* (e.g. erotic fantasizing, flirting and sex) are of paramount importance for young partygoers; (ii) sexualized *territories* (e.g. private parties, rural feasts and the backseat of cars) significantly shape the experience and performance of one-night stands; and (iii) contrary to previous research, one-night stands are to a large degree associated with *pleasure*—the immediate pleasure of having sex and the long-term pleasure of telling about it to others.

**Conclusion:** We argue that drunken one-night stands are part and parcel of a drinking culture that places high value on sexual encounters and personal sex stories.

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### Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, casual sex within a so-called “hook-up culture” has been described as prevalent among young people (Freitas, 2013; McIlhane & Bush, 2008). Casual sex refers to varied and complex practices, and is usually defined as any consensual sexual activity that occurs between two people (e.g., strangers, recent acquaintances or friends) outside of a committed or long-term relationship (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). A distinction has been made between one-night stands—usually implying one-off sexual intercourse with a person—and hook-ups, including a broader variety of possible acts and longer-term casual sexual arrangements, such as “friends with benefits”, “fuck buddies” or regularly having sex with an ex-partner (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Campbell, 2008; Lewis, Atkins, Blayney, Dent, & Kaysen, 2013). Early terms included “permissiveness without affection” and “premarital sex”, whereas the current concept “non-romantic sex” captures sex that occurs outside the context of a hegemonic romantic narrative (Farvid & Braun, 2017).

The main pull of casual sex is assumed to be the desire for uncommitted sexual activity (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether,

2012). However, recent research has linked casual sex to the concept of emerging adulthood, suggesting that casual sex may fill “relationship gaps”, or people being too busy for committed relationships because of work or studies, and a sense of being too young to be “tied down” (Garcia et al., 2012; Lyons, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013; Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2014). Previous studies have overwhelmingly focused on the negative aspects of one-night stands, such as lack of sexual pleasure, feelings of regret, poor relationship quality and reputational concerns (Campbell, 2008; Lyons et al., 2014; McCarthy & Grodsky, 2011). As outlined by Farrugia (2017: 283–284), notions of ‘regrettable’ sexual practices are often constituted through normative expectations of femininity and masculinity. Women are called up to regret failing to enact a “respectable” femininity while men are expected to regret potential harms caused by accidents and physical violence. Moreover, while intoxication may de-responsibilise men, it doubly responsabilises women, as they are accused of breaking norms as well as putting themselves in a position to be assaulted by breaking gendered expectations of behaviour.

A few recent studies have presented more complex findings, where casual sex has also been associated with psychological and affective pleasures, such as “ego boosts”, the opportunity to be “naughty”, and to experience “thrills”, i.e., novel and exciting transgressions (Farvid & Braun, 2017). Note that a sexual double standard is still very much present among young people in Norway, where this study has been conducted (Fjaer, Pedersen, & Sandberg,

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2015). Still, this study challenges overly negative descriptions of women's experiences of one-night stands.

### Alcohol assemblages, casual sex and pleasure

Assemblage theory describes how the uses, experiences and wider implications of alcohol are conditioned by affective assemblages, consisting of human as well as non-human agents (Duff, 2014, 2016; MacLean & Moore, 2014). They may be understood as multi-sensory and as prompting certain performances and experiences while precluding others (Schüll, 2012). Alcohol use involves a multitude of factors and should not be understood in reductionist, (mono-)causal terms. As Duff (2016: 16) points out, an advantage of such "assemblage thinking" is that it enables us to see beyond "the subject of this [alcohol and drug] use as the primary ground of the articulation of drug problems" (p 16). This thinking has inspired a range of setting-sensitive studies, including how e.g. festival sites and nightclubs may be transformed to reduce the risks of using alcohol and other substances (Cooper & Tempalski, 2014; Rhodes, 2009; Wilton & Moreno, 2012).

Recent decades have seen dramatic changes in alcohol assemblages across the Western world, linked to what is commonly referred to as the night-time economy (NTE), i.e., the leisure and retail provisions of cities at night (Graham & Homel, 2008; Shaw, 2010). The concentration of drinking venues has increased in many inner-city areas (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003), leading to a proliferation of "drinktainment" and the presence of predominantly young consumers (Jayne, Holloway, & Valentine, 2006). There has also been a rise in inner-city alcohol use, alcohol-related accidents and violence (Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2003). Therefore, to understand contemporary alcohol use, geographers have tried to combine research on embodiment and affect with a focus on space and place (Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2010). Other studies in this framework have investigated sexual behaviour (Allred & Fox 2015; Braidotti, 2013; Fox & Allred, 2013). Fox and Allred (2013) suggest that the "sexual assemblage"—based on fundamental *relationality* of bodies, things and social formations should be in the centre of such research. Each of these elements becomes meaningful only in the assemblages that "produce both events and the apparent reality of the relations that they comprise" (Allred & Fox, 2015: 908).

One-night stands and sexual experiences in nightlife environments are often associated with problems (Freitas, 2013; McIlhane & Bush, 2008). In our sample of young Norwegian binge drinkers, we have observed a variety of sex-related problems, including sexual assaults and victimization, which took place during or immediately after drinking events, in particular among women (Tutenges, Pedersen, & Sandberg, 2017). In this paper, however, we emphasise the *pleasures* of drunken sex during one-night stands. Drawing on affect and assemblage theory, we show how drunken sex is a valued part of contemporary nightlife; it provides an avenue for sexual explorations within specific "sexualized territories" where playful deviance is legitimated (Fjaer & Pedersen, 2015; Redmon, 2003). Drunken one-night stands often imply time-out and lack of control, and are often recounted as "crazy" and "wild" in a humorous tone. This is crucial to understand why they are often experienced as intensely pleasurable.

Within a framework of assemblage theory, desire is not understood as an essence or a quality of the body. Rather, it is brought into being in a specific socio-spatial context, which results in capacities such as to feel sexual attraction and act sexually. Young people's sexual practices are closely associated with nightlife environments and the use of alcohol. Indeed, nightlife settings have been described as "affectively charged" (Duff, 2008) or "intensity machines" (Tutenges, 2012: 132), which fire up

desires and facilitate sexual encounters (Heinskou, 2002). Light, smoke, laser shows and décor serve to create sensuous parallel worlds, while the music and its beat encourage "the movement of rhythmically gyrating bodies caught up in the kinaesthetic of passion" (Tan, 2013: 725). Here, multiple bodies come close; this bodily proximity *per se* can have intoxicating effects because it allows for affective flows to speed up and for mutual awareness to increase (Collins, 2004: 34; Fjaer & Tutenges, 2016). Drawing on assemblage theory, Böhling (2015) observes how the dance floor is a key arena for the enjoyment of music, dancing and, as the night progresses, for "blatant sexual encounters and scoring" (p 138). Alcohol and other drugs contribute to this sexualized intersubjectivity by amplifying "the subject's capacities to resonate" with other people, dissolving the distance between self and other (Tutenges, 2015) and lubricating "bodies to affect and be affected sexually" (Tan, 2013: 724).

Alcohol assemblages are always conflictual, mobilizing a diversity of forces that function at a semi- or subconscious level (Thrift, 2008: 38) as "a set of flows moving through the bodies of human and other beings". Alcohol assemblages may be harnessed and manipulated for commercial purposes, such as the promotion and sale of alcohol or other legal and illegal commodities (Tan, 2013). However, humans are never merely passive recipients of such affective flows; they actively contribute to them through their own performances (Duff, 2008: 388; Fjaer et al., 2015; Tutenges, 2015).

Assemblage theory has successfully highlighted the socio-spatial context of alcohol and drug use. Continuing the expansion of assemblage theory, we believe that pleasurable sexual experiences while drunk cannot be understood without considering how they are produced and played out in a narrative environment that appreciates drinking stories. Alongside spatial factors, these stories are part of the "constellation" – i.e. the specific articulations among a myriad of heterogeneous elements – (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that produces particular drinking practices. Gubrium and Holstein (2009) emphasise that storytelling and interpretative work must be seen as reflexively intertwined with their narrative environments. The sex episodes in this study were told in qualitative interviews, but reflect the narrative repertoire of the partying and NTE context and were often framed as drinking stories (Tutenges & Rod, 2009; Workman, 2001). This narrative genre emphasizes what is unexpected and often interprets it in a humorous manner. The narrative environment of a night-time party context influences interpretations of events and can also shape and motivate particular experiences (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013).

In this paper, we focus on the pleasures of drunken one-night stands, by which we mean acts of alcohol use combined with sexual interaction. We do so not to deny that drunken sex can be unpleasant as well as dangerous, in particular for women (Devries et al., 2014), even if drunken men may also be recipients of unwanted sexual approaches (Larimer, Lydum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999). However, women are usually more exposed, through a complex interplay of physiological effects of alcohol, sex scripts and rape myths, which work together to normalize male dominance and sexualized violence (Cowley, 2014).

At the same time, surprisingly many of those binge drinkers we interviewed, of both genders, spoke openly and in positive terms of being drunk and having casual sex. We will explore the connection between alcohol use and the "sexualized territories" where these experiences occurred. We link the presentation of sexual exploration, territories and pleasures to how they were situated in a particular alcohol assemblage. We further discuss how the pleasures of one-night stands must be understood within a narrative repertoire of "crazy" and "fun" drinking stories. In fact, part of the pleasure of one-night stands is not sexual experiences *per se*, but that they offer good material for storytelling.

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