



Research paper

Transformation and time-out: The role of alcohol in identity construction among Scottish women in early midlife

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in drinking by women in early midlife, little alcohol research has focused on this group. We explore how alcohol is associated with the construction of gender identities among women aged 30–50 years in the west of Scotland, United Kingdom. We draw on qualitative data from 11 focus groups (five all-female, six mixed-sex) with pre-existing groups of friends and work colleagues in which women and men discuss their drinking behaviours. Analysis demonstrated how alcohol represented a time and space away from paid and unpaid work for women in a range of domestic circumstances, allowing them to relax and unwind. While women used alcohol to construct a range of identities, traditional notions of femininity remained salient (e.g. attention to appearance, drinking ‘girly’ drinks). Drinking enabled women to assert their identity beyond the roles and responsibilities often associated with being a woman in early midlife. For example, some respondents with young children described the transformative effects of excessive drinking which allowed them to return temporarily to a younger, carefree version of themselves. Thus, our data suggest that women’s drinking in early midlife revolves around notions of ‘idealised’ femininity but simultaneously represents a way of achieving ‘time out’ from traditional female responsibilities such as caring for others. We consider these findings within a broader social and cultural context including alcohol marketing, domestic roles and motherhood and their implications for health promotion.

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Introduction

Although men remain more likely than women to drink heavily and experience problems related to alcohol (Emslie & Mitchell, 2009; Plant, 2008), there is growing concern about how women’s drinking is changing. A recent systematic review (Smith & Foxcroft, 2009) concluded that an increase in drinking among women is one of the most important trends in alcohol consumption in the United Kingdom over the last 30 years. While the focus of concern is often on younger people, Smith and Foxcroft highlight the increase in drinking that has occurred among older age groups. Indeed, in 2012 (ONS, 2013), similar proportions of women aged 16–24 years, 25–44 years and 45–64 years reported exceeding the UK Government’s daily drinking benchmark (3 units for women) on a single day in the previous week (30%, 29% and 30% respectively). This

suggests that there is a need for more research on the experiences of female drinkers, particularly those in midlife.

The consumption of alcohol is linked to gender at many levels (Emslie & Mitchell, 2009; McCartney, Mahmood, Leyland, Batty, & Hunt, 2011; Wilsnack & Wilsnack, 1992); qualitative research has demonstrated that the ways in which certain drinking behaviours are adopted, rejected or experimented with can powerfully challenge or endorse ‘idealised’ masculine and feminine identities (Lyons, 2009; Saltonstall, 1993). Gender here is understood as a ‘performance’ that may change according to the context; in sociological terms, it has been argued that ‘doing’ gender involves “creating differences between ... women and men... that are not natural, essential, or biological” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137). In this way, powerful groups legitimise and reproduce social relations that result in or reinforce their dominance so that these gendered distinctions appear natural and normal. In order to respond effectively to changing trends in alcohol consumption, we need a more detailed understanding of the ways in which alcohol is consumed (i.e. whether, when, with whom, and what) and how

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health behaviours such as drinking can be a powerful and commonplace way through which women (and men) perform a range of gendered identities.

Traditionally, 'drinking like a man' – excessive, public consumption of alcohol while simultaneously retaining control over one's body (Lemle & Mishkind, 1989) – served to demonstrate characteristics associated with culturally dominant (i.e. 'hegemonic') forms of masculinity such as strength, competitiveness and self-control, and legitimate a hierarchical relationship with femininity and other less powerful configurations of masculinity (Connell, 1995). Women who take on 'masculine' characteristics (e.g. authority, lack of compliance) risk being defined as deviant (e.g. 'sluts' or 'bitches'); these 'pariah femininities' (Schippers, 2007) are feared as they contaminate the relationship between masculinity and femininity. Thus, female drinkers have traditionally been criticised for neglecting their roles as wives and mothers and have been portrayed as sexually promiscuous and lacking in characteristics associated with 'femininity' (e.g. being caring, concerned about appearance and health-conscious) (Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2004; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007; Thom, 1997).

Recent qualitative research has found that young women perceive heavy drinking as pleasurable, sociable and socially expected and employ stories about drunken nights out (which sometimes include passing out and vomiting) to facilitate group bonding (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009; Guise & Gill, 2007; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2013; Sheehan & Ridge, 2001; Smith & Berger, 2010; Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013). Peralta (2008) found that young women in the United States used alcohol to excuse 'gender inappropriate' behaviour such as taking risks, not worrying about their appearance, and being more assertive in their pursuit of potential sexual partners. Hartley, Wight, and Hunt (2014) reported similar findings for teenage girls in Scotland. At the same time, there have been rapid changes in the social context of drinking in the UK; the liberalization of licensing hours, economic deregulation of the drinks industry and the increased affordability and availability of alcohol has been accompanied by the increasing feminisation of the night time economy and the sophisticated marketing of brands of alcohol to women which explicitly draw on sexual stereotypes (e.g. the 'Lambrini Girls just want to have fun' campaign) (Galloway, Forsyth, & Shewan, 2007; Hastings, 2010; Measham & Brain, 2005).

While this may suggest that young women have to some extent appropriated hegemonic masculine behaviours in relation to alcohol, there remain important boundaries that both women and men must negotiate in order to 'do' gender appropriately. Contemporary research suggests that drinking beer – particularly out of pint glasses – remains linked to masculinity; that many young women continue to 'feminize' what, and how, they drink; and that public drunkenness by other women, particularly older women or working-class women, is still positioned by young women as deviant and embarrassing (Lyons & Willott, 2008; Rúdólfssdóttir & Morgan, 2009). Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, and Mistral (2013) outline the profound dilemmas and contradictions of femininity for young women in the UK engaging in the current 'culture of intoxication'; they are supposedly 'empowered' and considered independent through drinking excessively, but simultaneously are not supposed to lose control or act in a way considered 'slutty'. Similarly, Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, and D'Arcy (2005) found that excessive drinking had complex connotations for female undergraduates in the United States: 'drinking like a guy' did not equate to power or equality but instead emphasised their (hetero)sexuality to male peers. Thus, although more recent cultural portrayals of women's drinking now encompass their increased access to, and consumption of, alcohol, men's drinking is still constructed as 'different' to women's (Lyons, Dalton, & Hoy, 2006) and double standards persist (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012).

Very little qualitative research on the social context of drinking has specifically focused on women in early midlife (defined here as 30–50 years). Often, studies either include women at this stage of the lifecourse as part of their sample but do not focus on gender (Ling et al., 2012; van Wersch & Walker, 2009) or concentrate on particular groups of women, such as those with drinking problems (Staddon, 2009) or mothers (Killingsworth, 2006; Waterson, 2000). Rolfe, Orford, and Dalton (2009) interviewed female English 'heavy' drinkers (consuming at least 35 units of alcohol in a typical week) aged between 28 and 56 years and their findings provide some useful context for our research. First, they found that these women constructed alcohol as a form of self-medication which altered their mood and helped them to cope and function better in their roles as mothers, carers and paid workers. Secondly, they associated alcohol with leisure and pleasure, and as 'time out' from paid work. Thirdly, in order to resist being positioned as unwomanly, sexually promiscuous or lacking in respectability, these female 'heavy' drinkers had to perform discursive work such as contrasting the unacceptable public drunkenness of other (frequently younger) women with their own controlled, mainly home-based drinking.

Our study used a qualitative approach to explore how women in early midlife represented their alcohol consumption in the west of Scotland. We have previously reported (Emslie, Hunt, & Lyons, 2012; Lyons, Emslie, & Hunt, 2014) how these women and men of similar ages (Emslie, Hunt, & Lyons, 2013) constructed themselves as experienced drinkers who, through accumulated knowledge of their bodies, could achieve a desired level of intoxication, and placed their parenting and paid work responsibilities at the centre of their drinking practices. However, further analysis showed that this self-presentation of 'older and wiser' drinkers was undermined by drinking stories, accounts of peer pressure to drink, and descriptions of using alcohol both as a way to survive the tensions of, and a reward for completing, paid and unpaid work. Here, we focus solely on the female respondents to explore how alcohol is associated with 'doing' femininity in early midlife.

Methods

The DrAM (Drinking Attitudes in Midlife) study aimed to explore the social context of drinking in 'early midlife' adults. We were interested in this period of the lifecourse because the alcohol research agenda has focused almost exclusively on younger drinkers (teenagers and those in their twenties). Rather than viewing 'midlife' as a singular category, we conceptualise it as socially constructed, fluid and "essentially interactive between people and their environment" (Backett & Davison, 1995, p. 630). Thus, individuals may share some common experiences of changing adult roles and responsibilities and ageing bodies, but are likely to attach different meanings to the experience of 'midlife' (Wray, 2007). While we were interested in this broadly defined stage of the lifecourse rather than age per se, for recruitment purposes we focused on adults aged around 30–50 years. Our intention was to recruit a diverse sample. Because we interviewed 'naturally occurring' groups (i.e. individuals who already knew each other – see below), this sometimes involved respondents at a similar life stage but of different chronological ages (e.g. one group of mothers of young children ranged from 30 to 41 years).

Qualitative research enables insight into people's (often contradictory) meanings and experiences and also highlights relevant social processes (Chamberlain & Murray, 2008). As we were interested in the social nature of drinking, we conducted focus group discussions with people who knew each other and so could draw on shared narratives and experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). Previous work exploring young people's perceptions of alcohol has used these methods successfully (Lyons & Willott, 2008). We conducted same

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