



British women's experiences of drinking alcohol: Dynamics of emotional proximity and distance



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ABSTRACT

Research on alcohol consumption suggests that friendship and peer relations are highly influential and have a decisive impact on drinking behaviours. Further, that women's friendships appear to be characterised by emotional disclosure and 'knowing' one another. In this paper I draw on debates around emotional intimacy, ideas of 'closeness' and 'distance' to explore how this might work when young women go out and drink alcohol. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 25 British undergraduate female students aged 18–25, this research suggests that one of the compelling appeals of alcohol is that it creates a 'space of suspension', whereby feelings of being both close and distant (intimate proximity) coexist, often for strategic reasons associated with security. Two themes emerged from the data: firstly that the young women had a preference for paradoxically maintaining 'distance' alongside 'closeness' with friends, and secondly, that contingencies of safety and vulnerability promoted the need for co-operation to manage risk in the night-time economy. These themes permeated relationships and became a significant dynamic in group behaviour creating a tension between functionality and friendship. This paper contributes to a growing body of work that suggests intimacy and women's friendships are complex: traditional conceptions about young women seeking intimate and close friendships need reevaluating to take into consideration how 'distance' within groups is both desirable and negotiated, and may be facilitated through the drinking of alcohol.

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1. Introduction

Women's drinking behaviour continues to produce media anxiety, public scrutiny and moral panic (Day et al., 2004; Plant, 1997). Hence, it is not surprising that it has attracted considerable academic attention and concern amongst policy makers (Brown and Gregg, 2012; Day, 2010; Holloway et al., 2009; Leyshon, 2008; Lyons, 2009). This growing corpus of literature seeks to understand the relationship between women's drinking and the meaning of cultural and social change in women's lives (Brown and Gregg, 2012; Gmel et al., 2000; Measham and Østergaard, 2009; Waitt et al., 2011), whilst also examining the centrality of space in gendered drinking experiences, for example in private and public places (Holloway et al., 2009). Human geographers have begun to make significant contributions to such debates on the gendering of alcohol consumption (see Jayne et al., 2011 for a review of this). Certainly, gendered drinking identities are grounded in complex social relations and cultural values which have been found to vary

by class, ethnicity and across space, time and the lifecourse (Banister and Piacentini, 2008; Emslie et al., 2012; Jayne et al., 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012; Partanen, 2006). Cultural differences in drinking patterns are important and reveal the ways in which a society symbolises and regulates gender roles, for example, through the links between drinking behaviour and conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Gmel et al., 2000; Holmila and Raitasalo, 2005; Wilsnack and Wilsnack, 1997). Thus, the drinking behaviour in one society might vary greatly from another according to the cultural framing of alcohol (Gefou-Madianou, 1992; Room, 1997).

2. Female friendship

The literature on women's drinking frequently refers to the importance of friendship. Drinking and drunkenness are influenced by our relationships with others, in particular friendship and peer groups (Heimesdóttir et al. 2010; Montemurro and McClure, 2005; Rúðólfssdóttir and Morgan, 2009; Vander Ven, 2011; Yanovitzky et al., 2006). As Lyons and Willott (2008) note, binge drinking is instrumental in drawing groups of young people together providing shared social experiences, having fun together and the

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(re)telling of narratives of nights out. Vander Ven (2011) notes how positive peer confirmation – feeling appreciated and valued by friends – plays an important role for young people when drinking. This may also include some form of ‘drunk support’ when trouble arises on a night out (Vander Ven, 2011). Similarly, Jayne et al. (2011) describe how the young women in their study observed their female friends looking out for one another, compared to their male counterparts who would deliberately try and get each other drunk. In his analysis of the use of evening leisure spaces in a British city, Hubbard (2005) notes the affective, emotional and embodied experiences of drinking alcohol and how a feeling of ‘togetherness’ and sharing is facilitated on a ‘night out’ within close groups of friends and also with others (see also Hadfield, 2006; Jayne et al., 2010). Such research is not unusual in indicating the importance of friendship, belonging and kin relationships in social contexts. As Friedman (1989) asserts, many scholars have moved away from analyses which look at abstract individualism to a view of the ‘social self’ that acknowledges the importance of social relationships and human community.

Rúðólfssdóttir and Morgan (2009) who examined the relationship between middle class female students and alcohol found that alcohol itself has become a ‘friend’ for many of these young women. Alcohol could be, the authors suggest, the friend ‘able to inject the necessary oomph for things to take off in social interactions’ (p497). This research highlights more widely how friendship and being part of a group provides camaraderie which links to feelings of safety in public spaces. For the young women in their study, it is from this ‘relative safety’ of the friendship group that gave them the confidence to experiment and explore new social behaviours. Similarly, Sheehan and Ridge’s (2001) study of Australian secondary school students emphasises the “good story” whereby tales of fun and adventure are seen as important for ‘group bonding’ and identification. Indeed, drinking is often associated with a coming together, a perceived close proximity and sense of connection with friends (Lyons and Willott, 2008; see also; Leyshon, 2008). Szmigin et al. (2008) indicate that having ‘fun’ is frequently described as the primary objective and linked to cohesiveness and a feeling of closeness in groups that drink excessively.

However, despite friendship appearing to be central in these studies, there is a chronic tendency for this literature to (uncritically) assimilate ‘fun’ and ‘bonding’ with drinking, and assume friendship is a passive backdrop or by product to the issues being addressed. The normative gendering of friendship in such literature is also notable. Somewhat unsurprisingly the wider literature on gender and friendship suggests that women seek more intimacy in friendships than men (Jamieson, 1998). Drawing on Pat O’Connor’s work on friendship, Jamieson (1998) cites that what is more characteristic of female friendship is emotional disclosure and a desire to ‘really know’ one another (Jamieson, 1998: 99). O’Connor (1998) suggests that the attractiveness of female friendship in a relational form offers women a definition of (them)self that offers autonomy, and an alternative definition of identity which enables women to critique their status as ‘other’ in patriarchal society (p117). However, she also concurrently proposes that such concepts of friendship (based on notions of intimacy) are highly problematic as they reinforce an essentialist discourse (women as emotional). She argues that the wider social and cultural contexts in society may paradoxically both inhibit as well as facilitate women’s friendship. Whilst the idea of disclosure and knowing one another in female friendships has been challenged (Walker, 1994 in her in-depth study with 52 men and women found there to be a tendency to exaggerate the degree of ‘disclosing intimacy’ in women’s friendships) few studies have focussed specifically on relationality amongst young women drinking together.

The avoidance of intimacy and closeness whilst drinking alcohol has, however, been noted in the literature, particularly in male

group drinking and thus this is assumed to be highly gendered (de Visser and Smith, 2007). Gough and Edward’s sociological study on male drinking examines the reproduction of masculine identities and suggests that unconscious anxieties and desires (around the castrating father) ensure that intimacy is avoided and rivalry preferred amongst male drinkers (Gough and Edwards, 1998). Other studies have also noted the overt performance of hegemonic masculinity, rivalry, joking, teasing and competitive sociability when men drink together (Campbell, 2000; Leyshon, 2005). The literature on alcohol therefore confirms and follows particular prescribed ideas about gender and friendship (women as being close, emotional and supportive while men actively avoid and deny this). Crucially the research seems to suggest that ideas of closeness, distance and proximity follow normative gendered patterns as either more *masculine* or more *feminine*.

3. Friendship and emotional intimacy

This paper therefore seeks to provide a fuller analysis by looking closely at how intimacy and distance might work amongst young women who drink. In particular, the idea of intimacy and talk in women’s friendships means that much of the existing research on alcohol and women’s friendships conflates terms like friendship, bonding and intimacy. In echoing Duff (2008) this tends to ‘essentialise’ gendered notions of friendship as having a set of distinct outcomes such as ‘bonding’ ‘sharing stories’ and ‘closeness’. Arguably friendships and relationality entail a much wider range of (sometimes complex) emotions from pleasure and happiness, humour and annoyance to anxiety and frustration. In addition, Whitaker (2011) argues that our treatment of female friendship as a power-free zone means that we fail to see how power imbalances might work within (and sometimes against) friendships. Further, anthropological and sociological research suggests that the meanings of friendship are culturally specific and vary by social class, ethnicity and culture (Barnard and Spencer, 2002). In light of this, it is timely to seek to understand how the dynamics of friendship may actively shape the geographies of women’s drinking relationships and behaviour.

Exploring friendship and the complex dynamics of emotions associated with friends offers considerable potential: emotions are closely connected to boundary forming processes and our relations with others (Bondi et al., 2005). Bondi (2005) has demonstrated how relationality in psychoanalytic theory (specifically of the object relations school) and psychotherapeutic theory of practice has relevance for geography. She suggests that engaging with the emotional dimensions of people’s experience of space and place has radical potential for geographical work. As Holt et al.’s (2013) study of young people with socio-emotional difficulties demonstrates, understanding how emotional reciprocity and dependence works in friendships is extremely valuable. Importantly, a relational theory of emotion does not render emotions as merely an individual attribute or object of study, nor does it distance emotions through non-representational accounts that attempt to go beyond the discursive. Instead emotions can be conceptualised as both personal and relational between and within people; and between people and their social worlds in ‘situated account of meaning-making and knowledge production’ (Bondi, 2005: 20).

Thien’s (2005) seminal work on emotional intimacy and distance is of relevance here. Dominant conceptions of contemporary intimacy are built around ideas of oneness and ‘being close’. These are, in both the literature and popular culture, highly gendered conceptions as they are terms frequently associated with women and women’s friendships. What Thien found is that in reality these notions are highly contested and constantly being challenged, reinterpreted and resisted. Her research on women’s emotional

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