"Just choose the easy option": Understanding students' risky alcohol use and social influence.

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Abstract

Previous research into young people's drinking behaviour has studied how social practices influence their actions and how they negotiate drinking-related identities. Here, adopting the perspective of discursive psychology we examine how, for young people, social influences are bound up with issues of drinking and of identity. We conducted 19 focus groups with undergraduate students in Australia aged between 18 and 24 years. Thematic analysis of participants' accounts for why they drink or do not drink was used to identify passages of talk that referred to social influence, paying particular attention to terms such as 'pressure' and 'choice'. These passages were then analysed in fine-grained detail, using discourse analysis, to study how participants accounted for social influence. Participants treated their behaviour as accountable and produced three forms of account that: (1) minimised the choice available to them, (2) explained drinking as culture and (3) described resisting peer pressure. They also negotiated gendered social dynamics related to drinking. These forms of account allowed the participants to avoid individual responsibility for drinking or not drinking. These findings demonstrate that the effects of social influence on young people's drinking behaviour cannot be assumed, as social influence itself becomes negotiable within local contexts of talk about drinking.

Keywords

Introduction

Young people, alcohol and the 'culture of intoxication'

Since the 1990s the focus on the consumption of alcohol by young people has grown due to several changes in drinking culture. In Kevin Brain and Fiona Measham's highly influential research about young people's drinking in Britain, they argue that these shifts in culture reflected factors that included the availability of new products such as 'alcopops' and young people (both underage and legal drinkers) drinking more alcohol per drinking session (Brain 2000). Regular risk-related alcohol consumption and illicit drug use became what young people normally do (Measham 2002). Furthermore, there is some evidence of the rise in 'binge drinking' over the use of other drugs (Measham 2004), and of this forming part of young people's construction of identity (Griffin et al. 2009) especially in marking the transition from childhood to adulthood (Beccaria and Sande 2003). While research into British youth drinking cultures indicates similarities between these and drinking cultures in other countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and Denmark, there are also important cultural differences. In Britain, for example the night-time economy is more developed, per capita consumption is higher, and British youths demonstrate a stronger commitment to extreme drinking than their Australian counterparts (Lindsay 2006; Griffin et al. 2009). For example, UK participants in Griffin et al (2009) research drink to forget or 'annihilate' themselves while Australian participants in Zajdow and MacLean's research (2014) aim to get 'tipsy'.

In addition to there being country-specific cultures of drinking, shifts in cultures of drinking are also highly gendered. Contemporary young women have more access to drinking venues than previous generations but in general, men continue to drink more than women, women and men have distinct drinking patterns and face different risks while out socialising (Lindsay

2006; Lindsay 2012). Additionally, not drinking and/or resistance to cultures of alcohol consumption can present challenges for young people. Opposition to alcohol consumption has been demonstrated as being achieved through the process of adopting various other subject positions that draw on cultural, religious or health/sport norms (Nairn et al. 2006). Although, for young men, challenges to normalised alcohol consumption also involve enactment of hegemonic masculinity as illustrated in the work on young men's drinking (de Visser and Smith 2007), and non-drinking has more negative consequences for men than for women (Conroy and de Visser 2012).

The increase in the number of alcohol products over the last two decades, 'binge drinking' and expansion of the night-time economy have shaped and normalised what has become known as the 'culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain, 2005, 262) whereby young people regularly develop altered states of consciousness for 'hedonistic reasons' (Measham and Brain, 2005, 277; Szmigin et al. 2011). This culture embraces both legal and illegal drugs and encompasses a broad range of young people (Measham and Brain 2005). However, the term 'binge drinking' has attracted criticism due to its simplicity and the negative connotations linked with excessive drinking that ignore young people's use of alcohol as 'having fun' and has been argued instead to be better termed 'calculated hedonism' (Szmigen et al. 2008). For clarity, in this paper we draw on the National Health and Medical Research Council *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol* (2009) which states that there is no 'safe' level of alcohol consumption, consuming no more than two standard drinks per day reduces risk of alcohol-related harm over a lifetime, and consuming no more than four standard drinks on any occasion reduces risk of alcohol-related injury resulting from that occasion. The term 'risk-related alcohol use' is used in this paper to indicate alcohol consumption that is likely to be in excess of four standard drinks. Where

authors have used other terms in their research, such as 'heavy' alcohol consumption, we retain their terms in the discussion of the literature.

Young university students and alcohol use

Students have been a particular focus in alcohol research because they are most commonly young adults, widely engage in alcohol-related practices and typically do so with peers and away from direct supervision. In the United States and Canada, and increasingly in Europe (Wicki, Kuntsche and Gmel 2010), research on students and alcohol consumption is well developed, but in Australia it is underdeveloped. Research in New Zealand has indicated that risk factors for students' heavy drinking include living in a residential hall or shared house (Kypri et al. 2009). In such situations, characterised by a lack of parental controls, students are more likely to put social gains, especially those associated with heavy alcohol consumption, ahead of academic achievement (Osborn, Thombs and Olds 2007). Clearly, not all young people consume alcohol (see Nairn et al. 2006) or engage in risk-related alcohol (and/or drug) use. As Smith (2015) points out, many young people reportedly drink in moderation at social events/parties and are also intolerant of intoxicated peers.

One of the prevailing approaches used to describe the relationship between the socialising practices of university students who live away from home and their risk-related alcohol use is pressure to conform to social norms (see, for example, Perkins 2002; Hildebrand et al. 2013), and that peer norms of binge drinking made it not only easy to binge drink but getting drunk was seen as an advantage and a source of approval (French and Cooke 2012). Spanning more than 50 years, the explanation of pressure has been dominated by key psychological theories that conceptualised pressure as resulting from social influences that acted upon the individual (see Festinger 1957; Treynor 2009). Thus, studies of young people's motivations for binge

drinking have examined the consequences of social norms and influences for drinking behaviours (Coleman and Cater 2005). However, much of this work has tended to treat individuals as passive recipients of social forces and has not captured how individuals themselves make sense of practices that are embedded within social and cultural contexts.

Over the past 10 years, therefore, studies have turned to the issue of how individuals negotiate the meanings that social practices have for them and the role of drinking within these. For example, in a study of young people's drinking in Denmark, Tutenges and Rod (2009) note that drinking stories provide a site for the negotiation of drinking-related actions. Instead of being treated as recollections of past episodes, such stories contribute to 'an ongoing and creative exploration of possible identities' (2009, 367). Thus, as well as demonstrating how young people reason about alcohol (Bogren 2006), discourse about drinking constructs identity possibilities both for young people who drink heavily (Johnson 2013) and for those who abstain from drinking (Nairn et al. 2006). The identities available in relation to drinking or not drinking are, however, by no means straightforward. Johnson (2013) draws attention to the ways in which enactments of identities by those who drink can be seen as performances by young people to their peers. In such instances, individuals who exaggerate the amount that they drink or who fake the effects of alcohol for them run the risk of being viewed by peers as inauthentic: although drinking might be the norm expected by peers, false claims of drinking will be criticised. Relatedly, Nairn et al. 2006 point to the identity problems that arise for young people who seek to socialise with peers without drinking alcohol. One way of attending to the problem of not fulfilling the expectation to drink is by seeking to negotiate different identities that render unlikely the consumption of alcohol, for example on grounds of participation in sport, or that preclude alcohol consumption on cultural or religious grounds. Alternatively, young people can rework

drinking in negative terms or can simply 'pass', that is pretend to others that they are drinking when they are not actually doing so.

Such studies then demonstrate how, regardless of whether they consume alcohol, young people's constructions of identity become closely interwoven with an expectation that they will drink. To date, rather less attention has been given to a different but related issue, namely how young people make sense of the impact of social influences on themselves and their actions. It is this topic that provides the focus of this study. In order to examine how social influences are bound up with issues of drinking and of identity we draw upon the perspective of discursive psychology (Wiggins and Potter 2013). From this perspective, identity is understood to be something that people *do* and not something that people *have*: identities are matters that individuals continually negotiate through language in the situated social interactions that they have with others. At the same time, identities are viewed as having an action-orientation, that is that people claim, resist or rework particular forms of identity in seeking to accomplishing specific outcomes, such as justifying their own actions, refuting accountability or criticising others (McKinlay and McVittie 2011). Thus, for example a person who claims not to drink for personal or religious reasons can be understood as justifying non-drinking behaviours while potentially criticising those who simply follow expected patterns of behaviour. Alternatively someone who describes himself or herself to peers as drinking (whether moderately or excessively) might in so doing avoid responsibility for breaching an expected form of drinking behaviour. There are, however, no criteria for assessing whether or not the descriptions that people give accurately reflect their behaviours or predispositions to drink or not to drink. Within a discursive approach, then, all such descriptions of the self and others and of certain forms of behaviour fall to be understood not

as simply reflecting attributes of the individual but instead as constructing versions of identity in relation to drinking or not drinking.

Here in order to investigate these versions of identity we examine the accounts within young people's descriptions of the social factors that come to influence their behaviours. In particular, we consider how students describe social influences upon their drinking behaviours and the actions that they accomplish through these descriptions, whether in justifying their own behaviours or in reworking or criticising the actions of others. We thereby examine the main research question: How do young undergraduate students construct alcohol use within the contexts of college and/or university life? We specifically draw on the notion of social pressure to drink at risk-related levels, as identified by students, (or the absence of such pressure) and the effects of these discursive constructions in accounting for their drinking (or non-drinking) practices.

Methodology

The study reported here is part of a larger project that examined students' alcohol use in Australia. The project involved two samples of university undergraduate students: those who lived in residential colleges affiliated with a university and those who lived in types of accommodation other than colleges while attending university – the samples are referred to throughout this paper as 'college students' and 'non-college students'. Three university ethics committees granted ethical clearance for the project.

Research design

This study used a qualitative research design based on focus group methodology (Krueger and Casey 2009) to gather data that were generated by group discussion and semi-structured

interviews. In the original design the intention had been to just use focus groups but the design was adapted to incorporate some semi-structured interviews when only one participant was available. We conducted a total of 19 focus groups in 2011 with 70 participants. Of these, the focus groups comprised 13 mixed-sex, 4 all female, and 2 all male. The six focus groups that were single sex were due to those group discussions that were held at single sex residential colleges. There were between one and five participants in each group and defined as small focus groups. In the two instances where only one participant attended the focus group discussion we conducted those as semi-structured interviews.

Participants

Based on a stratified purposeful sampling approach (Patton 2002) already used in the larger project in an online survey, recruitment was initially via an online survey, where respondents were invited to leave their preferred contact details if they were willing to participate in further research. The participants were mostly first year undergraduate university students, aged between 18 and 24 years and enrolled at one of the three major universities in two States in Australia: New South Wales and Victoria. The research team member who led the survey provided the contact details of students who were willing to participate to the researcher leading the focus groups and the students were contacted via email or phone. Additionally, we also used electronic and verbal announcements made by course coordinators and college principals and flyers posted around the colleges and universities that invited students to participate. An incentive to win a shopping voucher valued at AUD$50 for participation in a focus group was offered to all participants at each focus group, and non-alcoholic beverages and food were provided at each focus group. The focus groups were held in college and university meeting rooms.

The focus group researcher (J.H.) facilitated all the focus groups and collected the data. A research assistant was also present and recorded field-notes that were later referred to as an additional source of data and cross-referenced with transcript data during the initial identification of key themes. At the beginning of each focus group participants were offered another opportunity to read the information and ask questions about the study before they signed a consent form. The discussions were guided by a series of five questions with prompts. The question areas were designed so far as possible to allow participants to raise and discuss issues of most relevance to them relating to student drinking and included the following:

Focus group interview schedule

1. Would you tell me about consuming alcohol? Prompts: what do you drink, how often?

2. Where do you mostly consume alcohol? Prompts: How are parties arranged/begin?

3. Why do you consume alcohol? Prompts: Do you have a pre-set drinking limit?

4. What steps do you take (or not) to keep yourself safe when drinking alcohol? Prompts: have you found what you do is effective? If not, why?

5. What suggestions do you have (if any) for improving the safety of yourself and friends when drinking alcohol? Prompts: How would that work in practice?

The facilitator took time at the beginning of the discussion to develop a sense of rapport and trust with the group. For example, the facilitator introduced herself, as did the research assistant, asked the participants to introduce themselves, encouraged a conversational style of interaction, made several assurances about confidentiality and anonymity and provided guidance on how to include information about risk-related alcohol use without compromising their own or other people's safety or confidentiality. The care taken at the beginning of each

focus group, as far as it is possible to ascertain, resulted in accounts of actual alcohol related events. However, given there had been a broader climate of criticism about young people and alcohol use, and particular media reports of alcohol-related behaviour of students living in university colleges, the participants were initially quite reticent to talk about alcohol use alcohol-related risk and/or incidents because of it being potentially punishable. At several points the facilitator also reinforced the confidentiality of the content of the discussion, and as time progressed the discussions flowed a lot more freely with all participants making contributions. Participants typically reported alcohol consumption constituting approximately six or more standard drinks on any single occasion as a practice that they either engaged in themselves or were affected by through others' drinking. The focus groups were audio-recorded, lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and the data were fully transcribed.

Analysis

As discursive researchers have previously noted, focus group discussions are not sites of everyday naturally occurring discourse. Instead, discussions of this sort are marked by what Puchta and Potter (2004) term the 'interactional choreography' of researcher and participants. One feature of such discussions is that they are conducted in researcher-led settings, resulting in the data reflecting, at least in part, researchers' rather than participants' concerns. In consequence, the stakes for participants can be lower than would be found elsewhere (Stokoe 2010). For these reasons, various writers (e.g. Edwards 2003; Stokoe 2010; Stokoe and Edwards 2007) have argued in favour of analysing naturally occurring talk instead of that produced through such methods. Here, by contrast, we treat focus group discussions as sites of social practice where discourse is occasioned within a specific form of social interaction, in line with the perspective advocated by Talmy (2011). Moreover, as Condor and colleagues (Condor et al. 2006) have pointed out, such interactions provide contexts within which all of

those who are co-present negotiate issues of relevance to them. In this respect, for the present study, discussions with peers provide an especially relevant context within which to examine how the participants jointly negotiate their understandings of drinking or non-drinking and how they account for their actions and the potential impact of social influence on these.

The lead focus group researcher (J.H.) read the transcripts multiple times and reviewed all field-notes. Consistent with the aim of the present study, the data set was coded for all passages in which the participants referred to potential social influences upon their behaviours. This process was conducted inclusively with all passages of potential relevance being selected out for further consideration. The research team then initially analysed all such passages using thematic analysis (Pope, Ziebland and Mays 2000) to identify the main topics of pressure on students to drink alcohol. After repeated readings, three main themes and sub-themes related to pressure were identified (see Table 1). This process of thematic analysis allowed identification of the main themes within the data that were relevant for the participants themselves, paying particular attention to participants' references to 'pressure', 'choice', and similar terms. Following identification of the main themes, attention turned from the content of the talk to how participants managed their talk: from what they talked about to how they talked about the relevant topics. Six extracts from four focus groups were subjected to fine-grained analysis, in accordance with recognized principles of discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter 2005; McKinlay and McVittie 2008; Wiggins and Potter 2013). Using this framework, discourse is treated as a topic in its own right and not as a means of uncovering what people *really* think or believe about what they are describing. The focus accordingly lies on the linguistic forms and the action orientations of the discourse that people use, and thereby on understanding what individuals are doing when they provide

particular descriptions of people, actions, or events.

In the present case we used this approach to examine the ways in which pressure to or not to drink at risk-related levels was constructed by young undergraduate students within the contexts of college and/or university life. Analysis focused on examining how participants described their own and others' behaviour and the university and/or college contexts in which their drinking or non-drinking took place. Particular attention was given to how participants' descriptions functioned to account for their actions and to resist blame for what might be considered risk-related drinking or to attribute responsibility elsewhere.

Several members of the project team, including those with specific expertise in discourse analysis, conducted the first comprehensive discourse analysis that was then circulated to the remaining team members for further critical examination. Team members discussed what constituted shared, similar interpretations of the talk and any differences in the team's analyses were discussed until a consensus was reached. Final analysis led to the identification of three forms of talk about pressure that functioned in different ways to account for the participants' actions. The extracts presented below come from discussions within four of the focus groups and exemplify the forms of talk and discursive accounting found across the data set. The focus group participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Alcohol consumption in the context of social pressure

The thematic analysis of all focus groups resulted in the identification of a key area of talk about pressure in how students made sense of risk-related alcohol use. Pressure was constituted by three main themes: (1) Minimising choice; (2) Explaining drinking as culture; and (3) Resisting peer pressure together with related sub-themes.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The discourse analysis demonstrated how throughout their discussions organised around these three themes the participants displayed a sensitivity to describing their own drinking behaviours as choices and treated the matter as one for which they might be held accountable. Thus, in the extracts below, we can in many cases see the participants adopting a defensive orientation in discussing their own drinking behaviours. One way of dealing with potential accountability was for the participants to work up claims that, unlike others, they routinely resisted pressure to drink, as seen below. First, however, we consider two other ways in which participants sought to address accountability, namely by mitigating their own individual agency in relation to drinking. We begin by examining how they sought to minimize the extent of choice open to them, and thereafter consider how the participants explained drinking as something not of their own individual making but, rather, the outcome of 'culture'.

Minimising choice

A first way by which students addressed possible culpability for heavy drinking was to minimise the amount of choice they had in deciding whether or not to drink, as we see in Extract 1.

Extract 1 (Focus Group 2: All female participants; college students)

| 1 | I: | Do you consume alcohol? |
| 2 | Amy: | I think at college we are given like a choice, like most |

3		people drink but you are not like pointed a gun to your
4		face kind of like you have to drink, but like it is
5		assumed in college that everybody does drink.
6	Rachel:	It starts with O Week.[1]
7	Jasmin:	Yeah, they go out and it starts in O Week, it is not like
8		anyone is pressuring you in O Week it is more like.
9	Rachel:	There is still pressure though.
10	Hannah:	What.
11	Rachel:	I think there is still a pressure.
12	Hannah:	Yeah.
13	Amy:	Like peer pressure like when are all learning the same
14		dance moves together, everyone is you know kind of you
15		know tired of (…) so they grab a drink and you know there
16		is, there is some options but like you know you are going to
17		probably end up drinking at night so you kind of might as
18		well start early kind of thing. So you kind of just choose the
19		easy option and like follow everybody else.
20	Jasmin:	Yeah.
21	Hannah:	Yeah.
22	Hannah:	So nobody is like forcing you but you just do.

One immediately noteworthy feature of Extract 1 is the orientation that the focus group participants adopt in response to the interviewer's initial question 'Do you consume alcohol?' Amy's immediate response orients to the behaviour in question, as a matter

[1] 'O Week' is an abbreviation for Orientation Week held during the first week of the semester in universities in Australia comprising academic, information and social activities prior to the first week of classes.

that requires accountability, in that she begins to work up an account that is framed in terms of students having limited choice in deciding whether or not to drink. Thus, although she starts by stating that *'at college we are given like a choice'*, Amy quickly moves to restrict the extent of this choice in arguing that '*you are not like pointed a gun to your face kind of like you have to drink, but'*. This choice is then restricted further in that *'it is assumed'* that people will drink. We should note that as this account develops, Amy attributes the behaviours that she is describing to increasingly generalised groups of people *('we'*, *'most people'*, *'everybody'*). In this way, her account is framed not as a description of her own behaviour but as a description of what happens within specific social contexts within which she drinks.

The defensive orientation adopted by Amy and the extent of the choice available to college students in deciding to drink or not drink provide the focus for the remainder of the discussion seen in Extract 1. As the discussion progresses, the participants minimise the extent of choice that is available in two ways. First, they collaboratively build up the role of peer pressure and how it might influence someone to act in a particular way. Although Jasmin questions whether anyone is applying this pressure, the participants agree that there is pressure without attributing it to any particular source. Second, drinking rather than not drinking is presented as an almost inevitable outcome that involves no individual agency or choice ('*you know, you are going to probably end up drinking at night'*). This apparent inevitability provides a basis for making other decisions, including a decision to *'start early'* and to *'follow everybody else'*. This course of action thus becomes *'the easy option'*.

We should note throughout Extract 1 the use of generalized pronouns in the form of *'we'*, *'they'*, and the repeated use of the generalized *'you'*. In talk, speakers commonly use pronouns such as these to refer not to the immediate recipient or recipients of the talk but instead to indicate a more generalised set of people. The conversation analyst Harvey Sacks, in his pioneering *Lectures on Conversation* (Sacks, 1992), notes that speakers often use such descriptions to refer to a general sense of 'one' or 'anybody'. What this achieves, as Sacks (1992, vol. 1, 163-168) notes, is to suggest that what the participants are describing represents a 'general state of affairs' rather than anything specific to them as individuals. In the present case, the repeated reference to 'you' lends weight to the participants' arguments that college students in general have limited choice in choosing whether or not to drink, while also reducing any personal accountability on their part for the behaviour being described.

Discussions of limits on individual choices can also be seen in Extract 2.

Extract 2 (Focus Group 4: All female participants; college students)

1	Elise:	But like I think it is just one of those traditions that.
2	Grace:	People expect when they come to college.
3	Elise:	Like I know in our O Week like the goon layback[2] is a really
4		popular thing, but, like you know, in the other colleges you had to
5		do that there was no choice, and like they would line you up on the
6		floor and they would run along with a bag and you had no choice,
7		whereas here you know like if you want to do it lay down if you
8		don't you don't want to so like.

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[2] 'Goon layback' is a term used in Australia to refer to a drinking game where some students lie on the floor in a line and with their mouths open while another student(s) walks along the line pouring alcohol into their mouths. Typically the alcohol is wine and is poured directly out of the bags that line inexpensive wine boxes.

9   Grace: Yeah and like no one would put their hand up to even do it we were

10   like no.

In the exchange above, we again see the participants using the generalized *'you'* in suggesting that their descriptions reflect widespread, collective understandings of student life rather than personal views. Here the participants are describing the issue of choice in relation to one particular form of student drinking (*'the goon layback'*). Participation in this game is portrayed as a practice that is long established in that '*it is just one of those traditions'* and something that *'people expect'*. As well as this, participation is described as *'a really popular thing'*. Here, the presentations of drinking sessions, such as the *'goon layback'*, are regarded as an inevitable part of life for many students entering *'O week'*. In this discussion, however, the participants claim to have had the choice as to whether or not they took part in this drinking game. They attribute this ability to choose not to their own individual preferences but instead to the fact that they attend a particular college where *'if you want to do it lay down'* in contrast to other colleges where *'you had to do that there was no choice'*. Thus choice, in a similar way to the descriptions in Extract 1, becomes entirely dependent upon specific social circumstances rather than being a matter of individual agency.

Explaining drinking as culture

The participants attributed to social factors not only the effect of limiting personal choice but also the expectation that students would drink. In Extracts 3 and 4 below, we see participants describing a *'culture'* that virtually requires students to drink.

Extract 3 (Focus Group 2: All female participants; college students)

1   Amy: And it is sad to say that it like it is not as socially

2		acceptable like not to drink, like it is just so it is
3		just such a culture that you can't escape from.
4	Hannah:	Yeah it is kind of one of those things that when
5		you drink and someone is not drinking you are
6		like, oh, why aren't you drinking, and then, I mean
7		it is not like you are actually pressuring them but
8		at the same time that is pressure because they are
9		saying OK you know I am not doing what they are
10		doing blah blah.

Extract 4 (Focus Group 2: All female participants; college students)

1	Hannah:	It is kind of like a culture and in O Week they introduce
2		you to all these like alcohol rules almost like, you are
3		drinking with the wrong hand, or if like you are of a
4		lower level like freshers or something then they kind of
5		call "scull". So it is kind of like these, you know,
6		understood rules within college of how it works.

In these extracts, we see the participants referring to culture in matter-of-fact terms. Thus, in Extract 3 Amy states that *'it is just such a culture'* while in Extract 4 Hannah claims that *'It is kind of like a culture'*. In each case, 'culture' is described as imposing limits upon personal agency in that in Extract 3 it is presented as something that *'you can't escape from'* and in Extract 4 it is said to comprise *'understood rules within college of how it works'*. Against this background, non-compliance with prevailing expectations is described as behaviour that is accountable. We see, in Extract 3, Amy

arguing that not drinking is *'not as socially acceptable'* and Hannah describing how not

drinking can become a matter of challenge and potential pressure. It is interesting to

note how Hannah at lines 5 to 8 describes pressure being exerted on someone who is not

drinking. At line 6 she refers to the question that would be asked of such a person, 'why

aren't you drinking'. In calling for an account, this question presents such behaviour as

transgressing a norm, here the expectation that people will and do drink. Hannah,

moreover, 'actively voices' this question. The effect of 'active voicing', as previous

writers (Potter 1996; Wooffitt 1992) have pointed out, is to give the description a sense

of being witnessed as actually occurring as presented. Furthermore, she nominates the

source of the question in generalised terms, again drawing upon the pronoun 'you'. The

effect of framing the description in this particular way is that the expectation of drinking

becomes vividly depicted, yet presented as being a state of affairs instead of being

attributed to any specific individual or individuals. This formulation allows Hannah at

lines 7 to 8 to deny that any individual is pressurizing the non-drinker to drink while at

the same time to acknowledge 'that is pressure'. Pressure thus is subsumed into

prevailing expectations instead of having an active human source. On a similar note,

Hannah in Extract 4 refers to *'alcohol rules'* that allow for certain forms of drinking

behaviour that bear upon how the college *'works'*. In both extracts, then, culture is

portrayed as prescribing the drinking behaviours that people should follow, and in most

cases these involve heavy and/or harmful consumption. Amy in Extract 3 presents this

outcome as a matter of regret ('*it is sad to say'*) but nonetheless describes it as being

inescapable.

Here, the detail of the descriptions provided gives further emphasis to the participants'

claims for the effects of 'culture'. As in the previous extracts, we see speakers relying

upon the generalized 'you' in making their arguments. Also, the use of terms such as *'kind of one of those things'* (Extract 3) and *'kind of like a culture'* (Extract 4) and references to *'just'* (Extract 3) and *'you know'* (Extract 4) lend the arguments an idiomatic quality that make the effects of culture appear almost self-evident, inevitable and difficult to dispute.

Resisting peer pressure

This far, we have seen how in talking about drinking alcohol the participants produced descriptions of student behaviour in general without aligning themselves with the claims being made. At other points of the discussions, however, the participants did refer to their own actions and experiences. Interestingly, these personal descriptions came at times when the participants talked about their experiences of not drinking alcohol, and how gender becomes implicated in accounts, as seen below.

Extract 5 (Focus Group 17: Mixed-sex participants; non-college students)

1	Chloe:	I know that guys, the guys that I know are
2		really different in terms of whether the other
3		people around them are drinking, like if I am
4		at a party and a guy goes; "Oh, aren't you
5		drinking?" and if I say; "No", they will be
6		like; "Oh, cool", and that will be it. But with
7		a girl my girlfriends are all like; "Oh, why
8		aren't you drinking?" "Oh come on", you
9		know; "Get into the spirit", you know, they

10		will have as many lines in the book, whereas
11		guys are more willing to accept OK yeah you
12		have your own reasons not to drink. I don't
13		know if that is other guys …
14	Ella:	I agree with that I have all my girlfriends
15		pressure me to have a drink, they will buy
16		me drinks and I am it is like I am just not
17		interested.

Extract 6 (Focus Group 19: Mixed-sex participants; non-college students)

1	John:	And so, you know, my rugby mates, or you
2		know, there will be a twenty first or
3		something and you go to a bar or a night
4		club and stuff, and yeah, just it just
5		escalates… someone asks you for a drink
6		and unless you are really aggressive about it
7		at the beginning then they won't back off, it
8		just turns into a joke and then it is probably
9		because I am a smart Alec as well, I don't
10		know, I have probably deserved it a couple
11		of times. But yeah, I just wouldn't want to
12		and yeah one thing leads to another and end
13		up in a brawl over something really small
14		and stupid, I think that is more of a male
15		thing than an alcohol thing.

In Extracts 5 and 6, the participants describe personal experiences of being pressured to drink by other people. Their descriptions are framed as exemplars of types of events, in that in Extract 5 Chloe talks about *'like if I am at a party'* and John in Extract 6 refers to *'a twenty first or something'*. As a result, these descriptions are designed to be heard as referring to their experiences in general rather than specific occasions. Similarly to Hannah in Extract 3, the participants refer to the challenges that they experience on such occasions in terms of the questions that are asked. These questions, *'aren't you drinking'* (Extract 5) and *'someone asks you for a drink'* (Extract 6) work to present drinking as expected behaviour and, in doing so; render the participants' actions of not drinking potentially problematic. Again, as in the earlier extracts, we see that the expectation to drink is framed in highly generalised terms. In Extract 5, Chloe like Hannah in Extract 3 'actively voices' the questions and exhortations that others will direct at her to encourage to drink but attributes these comments to vaguely specified people that include 'a guy', 'my girlfriends', and 'they'. John in Extract 6 similarly refers to the vague 'someone'. Both forms of description function to describe the expectation of drinking in general and impersonal terms.

Here, we see two other points of particular note. First, the participants describe the interactions that typically unfold as a consequence of their choosing not to drink. In each extract, they describe how they deal with questions that others ask them about drinking. In Extract 5, Chloe refers *'if I say no'* and Ella states *'I am just not interested'* and John in Extract 6 states that *'I just wouldn't want to'*. Answers such as these, however, are depicted as leading to difficult consequences. Thus, we see in Extract 5 how resisting the possibility of drinking is said to lead to *'pressure'* while in Extract 6 John refers to the need to be *'really aggressive'* and an outcome of ending up *'in a brawl over something really small and*

stupid'. Second, and on a related point, we can note that the sources of this *'pressure'* and of possibly leading to the *'brawl'* are set out in highly gendered ways. In Extract 5, the participants collaboratively work up a description of how a '*guy'* will accept the participant's choice not to drink and even evaluate this choice positively (*'cool'*) but girlfriends use *'as many lines in the book'* and *'buy me drink'* thereby exerting pressure to drink. In Extract 6, we see P1 formulating the difficult outcome of being involved in a *'brawl'* as being *'more of a male thing than an alcohol thing'*, thereby indicating that the problems following a choice not to drink arise from other males such as his '*rugby mates'*. Interestingly, in each of the extracts 5 and 6 the participants put forward similar accounts that greater pressure to drink comes from friends who are the same sex and more acceptance of non-drinking from friends of the opposite sex.

What we see in both extracts above is how the participants construct their experiences of being on the receiving end of pressure to comply with the social expectations that people, including themselves, will drink. It is interesting to note that this pressure is attributed in gendered terms to others of the same gender as the participant. Peer pressure thereby is described as coming from *'friends'* and '*mates'*, who treat drinking as usual behaviour, who perceive non-drinking as problematic, and who will not readily accept choices not to drink made by the participants themselves. By claiming to be able to resist such pressure, the participants can present themselves as people who make individual decisions and who avoid being involved in what might be regarded as highly problematic although widespread social behaviour.

Discussion

The three forms of talk identified in this analysis, '*minimizing choice*', '*explaining drinking as culture*' and '*resisting peer pressure*', represent the key ways in which these undergraduate students dealt with risk-related drinking by presenting it as socially culpable behaviour. Simply put, students are able to argue that '*I don't do it…*' or '*people generally do it but …* ' and by doing so avoid individual responsibility. This is, however, discourse and cannot be treated as simply a reflection of any actual drinking practices or experiences of social influence and we have no way of knowing whether students act, believe and/or think as described or whether they have just found more acceptable ways of talking. Previous writers have pointed to how drinking stories provide opportunities for the exploration of identities (Tutenges & Rod, 2009) and some of the ways in which young people seek to work out identities associated with drinking (Johnson, 2013) or not drinking (Nairn et al. 2006). The present findings demonstrate that such negotiation of identities does not just orient to the expectation that young people will drink but also involves negotiation of the influence that this expectation has for them. There is no direct one-way relationship between social influence and individual identity and action: social influence itself becomes negotiable within local contexts of talk about drinking.

In terms of the social dynamics of university/college drinking in order to join, remain and belong in the culture of residential colleges and universities there is an expectation that students will drink heavily or at risk-related levels. Several social practices mark and initiate newcomers or "Freshers" to these cultures, particularly, 'O Week' and drinking games, where due to the novice status of first year students they comply in order to socialise, gain acceptance and approval. These practices should not, however, be assumed to take place in all colleges/universities or to the same extent. The transition to college/university life does

involve ongoing practices that are shaped by and construct young people's identity, and, as noted by Griffin et al. (2009), risk-related drinking forms part of the construction of that identity. Similarly, this study also demonstrates the identity possibilities for young people who drink heavily as argued in work by Johnson (2013).

Having said this, university students also have to navigate a path between the rhetoric of choice and treated as individuals by colleges and the university, and yet live among a culture of accepted risk-related drinking in which alcohol use is the major form of socialising. Indeed, as Smith's (2014) findings suggest, such cultures can as easily reflect adults' drinking behaviours as they do students' behaviours: it should not be necessarily assumed that those in colleges and universities who are responsible for enhancing students' welfare will inevitably provide good role models in encouraging safer drinking habits. In the present study, there was no distinction between 'the culture of intoxication' as normalised social practices (Measham 2002; Szmigin et al. 2011) in young people's everyday lives and the culture of risk-related drinking within college and university life. Yet, here there is a major contradiction in that students are positioned by colleges/universities as individuals who have responsibility to exercise choice and yet are expected to do so within a dominant culture of accepted risk-related drinking. Further to this, where students talked about non-drinking these accounts clearly illustrated the challenges that students faced to not conforming to the dominant drinking culture, and is consistent with similar research by Nairn et al. (2006) in that at times they had to draw on alternative positions to justify non-drinking.

Gender was a particularly prominent feature of the construction of social pressure in this analysis with young men encouraging each other to drink, young women putting pressure on other young women, but young women not encouraged by young men to drink heavily.

Gender dynamics operated in ways that drew on masculinity and power to lead to, if needed, physical aggression in public bars. Like de Visser and Smith's (2007) research, some young men in this study in the non-college sample of students talked about how heavy drinking was linked with masculinity, and those did not drink at risk-related levels had ambivalence towards alcohol use or were non-drinkers. Young women and young men both talked about how peer pressure was exerted more by same sex peers illustrating particular sets of gendered social dynamics.

The present findings, of course, do come from a relatively small-scale study: the present participants' descriptions of pressure and accounts of drinking do not necessarily reflect those of college/university students across Australia. Nonetheless, these findings demonstrate how constructions of pressure, context, and drinking can all be bound up together in students' accounts of their actions. They thus provide fresh insights into these issues that might usefully inform development of policy (Conrad and Barker 2010), especially the need for residential colleges and universities to address the readily available perception that the contexts they offer are inevitably linked with expectations that students will drink at the risk of their health.

Conclusion

It is concluded that individuals orient to a perceived culture of drinking as providing an explanatory framework for understanding why they drink as they do. Students constructed individual choice as being embedded within social dynamics that were coercive, involved college rituals of drinking games that exerted pressure on themselves and other students, particularly first year students, that going to university involved an accepted notion of risk-

related alcohol use, and that alcohol consumption was gendered. More research is needed into how college/university contexts are available as ready-made explanations of this sort and the implications of reduced cultural availability for individual accountability for drinking behaviour. In terms of policy, however, a first step surely should be one of awareness raising, both for universities and colleges and for the students who attend them. Accounts that describe social influence are just that; they should not be treated as reflecting external inevitabilities. As Edwards (1997, 8) points out, 'one of the most important features of descriptions is their could-have-been-otherwise quality. No description of anything is the only one that is reasonable or possible'. A useful first step, then, could be one of promoting alternative versions of social influence that young people could take up: versions that offer a different sense of accountability and possibilities for them to make their own choices in negotiating who they are.

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