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Young Men's Alcohol Consumption Experiences and Performances of Masculinity

Abstract

Background

The popular press is currently replete with headlines contending that young people are 'turning their backs on alcohol', and questioning whether drinking is becoming as socially unacceptable as smoking.

Methods

This paper engages with findings from mixed-method qualitative research (individual and friendship group interviews; diaries; and participant observation), conducted with 16 young men, aged 15-24: eight living in the middle-class area of Chorlton, and eight living in the working-class area of Wythenshawe, Manchester, United Kingdom.

Results

This paper demonstrates that alcohol consumption can allow for transgressions in men's performances of masculinity; that is, it can enable men to share and release emotions. Drinking together could thus be considered to potentially safeguard young men's psychological wellbeing. The well-being potential of alcohol consumption is significant, considering that 12.5% of men in the UK are suffering from one of the common mental health disorders; just over three out of four suicides are by men; with suicide being the biggest cause of death for men under 35.

Conclusion

Through highlighting the potential of alcohol to facilitate 'slippages' in performances of masculinity, this paper argues that there is a need for further multi-disciplinary research to generate insight into the well-being implications of not drinking as the new norm.

Key words: Alcohol; Gender; Masculinity; Performance; Sobriety

Young Men's Alcohol Consumption Experiences and Performances of Masculinity

Introduction

Internationally, in opposition to the weight of opinion positioning young people (aged 15-24) as irresponsible and as engaging in 'risky' behaviour, Pavlidis *et al.* (2019) contend that the numbers of young people choosing not to consume alcohol has increased significantly. Mirroring this trend, the media is increasingly permeated with news headlines claiming that 'young people turning their back on alcohol' (BBC, 2018). The Guardian (2018a), for example, has recently questioned whether drinking is becoming as socially unacceptable as smoking, highlighting that many young people are eschewing alcohol. Similarly, The Telegraph (2018) has contended that millennials are shunning alcohol, as getting drunk is no longer perceived to be 'cool'; indeed, participating in non-drinking months, such as 'go sober for October', or 'dry January', are claimed to be 'all the rage' (The Guardian, 2018b).

The shift towards sobriety is important, considering that in both the academic literature, and reports published by alcohol charities, alcohol consumption has been portrayed as a fundamental element in contemporary young adults' friendship-making (Maclean, 2015). For example, independent UK alcohol awareness charity, Drinkaware (2011:6), argue that, for many young people, alcohol consumption acts as a "social glue", binding friends together, and providing common ground. Drinkaware (2011) add that episodes of drunkenness are generally shared experiences and, after a night out, young people trade stories of drunken behaviour as a form of social currency. A report by Drinkaware (2014:5) has highlighted the role of alcohol in facilitating social interactions both with friends, allowing bonding, and with strangers, allowing for "social adventures". Further, American online news platform, Elite Daily (2015:no pagination), claims that "friends who drink together are more likely to stay friends forever".

More recently, Men's Health (2017) reported that men are more likely to become friends with other men if they consume alcohol with them.

This paper aims to go some way towards highlighting the social and well-being implications of a shift towards sobriety, by engaging with the complexities of the alcohol consumption practices and experiences of young men, aged 15-24, living in the suburban case study locations of Chorlton and Wythenshawe, Manchester, United Kingdom. These case study locations were chosen due to their different socio-economic make up (Chorlton being more middle-class, and Wythenshawe more working class), and their different spaces and places for drinking (e.g. parks, streets, bars, clubs). Through engaging with young men's drinking experiences on nights out, this paper argues that drinking together can enable men to share and release emotions, and therefore could be considered to potentially safeguard their psychological wellbeing. The well-being potential of alcohol consumption is significant, considering that 12.5% of men in the UK are suffering from one of the common mental health disorders (Men's Health Forum, 2017); just over three out of four suicides are by men; with suicide being the biggest cause of death for men under 35 (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Consequently, this paper argues that multi-disciplinary research must be conducted in order to understand the well-being implications of not drinking as the new norm.

This paper is structured as follows, first: we engage with literature surrounding gender and alcohol consumption. We then bring together literature on performing drinking identities, before going on to discuss performances of masculinity. Following this, we provide a brief overview of the case study locations, and discuss the methods used to conduct this research. After this, we draw on two main themes surrounding young men's drinking practices: hegemonic masculinity; and threatened masculinity, respectively, before drawing the paper to a close.

Gender and Alcohol Consumption

Drinking has typically been considered a “male domain”, thought to be male dominated, male identified, and male-centered (Capraro, 2000:307). Handling the effects of alcohol without showing signs of intoxication is thought to be an expression of male identity (Mullen *et al.*, 2007). The consumption of beer with male friends is considered to be a means through which men enact standard hegemonic masculinity (Willott and Lyons, 2012), and being noisy, urinating in the streets, and passing out on the street are often deemed acceptable behaviours for men (Mullen *et al.*, 2007). Whilst drinking and drunkenness have conventionally been considered masculine behaviours, commentators have argued that young women’s alcohol consumption has increased in recent years (de Visser and McDonnell, 2012), with young women increasingly “drinking like a guy” (Young *et al.*, 2005:241). Nonetheless, despite drinking more alcohol, more regularly, and consuming stronger drinks than they were two decades ago, Bailey *et al.* (2015) contend that young women still drink less than young men.

According to Mullen *et al.* (2007), the social context of male drinking is changing rapidly, and masculinities are being redefined. Recent changes to the drink industry, alcohol advertising, marketing and the retail trade have contributed to a movement towards “female-friendly” alcohol products and drinking spaces (Bailey *et al.*, 2015:747). Mullen *et al.* (2007) assert that the increasing diversity of drinking locations and alcohol products are instrumental in achieving new expressions of male identity among young men. Findings from de Visser and Smith’s (2007) study show that men also can have strong masculine identities that are characterised by an explicit reference to not drinking, or drinking in moderation (for instance, if they are successful at playing sports), whilst others in the study drank excessively without endorsing traditional masculinity. In Mullen *et al.*’s (2007) study, most participants preferred drinking in mixed-sex groups, which contrasts markedly with the experience of their fathers and grandfathers. This leads Mullen *et al.* (2007:162) to assert that there is a shift away from

the conventional hegemonic masculinity to a more “pluralistic interpretation”. Having engaged with literature on alcohol and gender, this paper now engages with Butler (1990) and Goffman (1959) to explore how drinking identities are performed.

Performing Drinking Identities

Writing in the context of class in the 1950s, Goffman (1959:79) deploys the perspective of “theatrical performance”; that is, the ways in which people present themselves and their activity to others, with a focus on the means by which people guide and control the impression others form. According to the Goffman (1959:17), people sometimes act in “thoroughly calculating” manners, projecting versions of themselves in order to communicate a certain impression to others, to provoke a desired response. Goffman (1959) is clear to point out that the impression of ‘reality’ fostered by a performance is delicate and fragile, and can come under discredit because of minor mishaps. Goffman (1959:109;114) distinguishes between a “front region” and a “back region”. ‘Front region’ refers to the space in which the performance takes place. ‘Back region’ is where performances are openly constructed, and where performers can relax and drop their fronts (Goffman, 1959).

According to Johnson (2013), teenage drinking activities are simultaneously backstage performances, secluded from the adult gaze, and frontstage performances, in which young people stage an impression for the audience of their peers. The author advances three forms of performance authenticity, bound up with the consumption of alcohol: “over-claiming”, “pretending”, and “acting hard” (Johnson, 2013:747). Regarding “over-claiming”, Johnson (2013:747) argues that young people in his study heavily criticised those who exaggerated their alcohol consumption, or embellished their alcohol-related activities. When discussing “pretending” to be drunk, Johnson (2013:747) notes that this performance was viewed as much more socially damaging than attempting to ‘pass’ as a drinker (e.g. by consuming non-alcoholic

drinks which share a visual resemblance to alcoholic drinks, in order to present oneself as a drinker). Finally, Johnson (2013:747) describes acting “hard”, as an example of performance authenticity. Acting ‘hard’ can refer to acting ‘older’, ‘mad’, ‘nuts’, or ‘cool’. The author claims that drinking alcohol in an attempt to gain the approval of others, or as a means of replicating the behaviour of ‘older’ young people, is considered a major transgression to peer group norms.

In the 1990s, queer theorist Judith Butler deployed a linguistic definition of performativity, as opposed to a theatrical account of performance, in an attempt to disrupt the dominant understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality (Gregson and Rose, 2000). Butler (2011) argues that being a man/woman is not internal - gender is not innate or natural, we are assigned a gender at birth; this is not a natural ‘given’. Rather, gender is continually produced and reproduced. Butler (2011) claims that gender is performative; that is, it produces a series of effects. The ways in which people act, walk, speak and talk consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman (Butler, 2011). The body becomes its gender through such bodily gestures, movements and enactments, which are renewed, revised, and consolidated over time (Butler, 1988).

Butler (1990:viii) considers how gender is performed, in relation to a “heterosexual matrix”. The author uses this term to designate:

That grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized...a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality

(Butler, 1990:151)

In the above, Butler (1990) argues that normative gender identities are inextricably embedded, and produced within hegemonic representations of heterosexuality (Renold and Ringrose, 2008); this is not a 'choice', it is learned behaviour in relation to socially constructed 'norms'. Butler (1990:25) argues, "there is no 'being' behind doing...the deed is everything". By this, Butler (1990) means that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, identity is constituted performatively by such 'expressions'. Unlike Goffman, Butler's (1990:142) performance is not conscious; this can be seen through her assertion that "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed".

Gender then, is not a stable identity; instead, it is culturally constructed through the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts...that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990:33). These acts are not singular; rather, they are reiterative (Butler, 1993). As these acts are continually repeated, there is space for transgressions and "slippage" (Butler, 1993:122). This notion that the process of repetition can "open up gaps and fissures" (Butler, 1993:10), can be seen in Butler's (1990:141) assertion that:

The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional discontinuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessnesses of this “ground”.

By this, Butler (1990) is recognising that gender transformations are possible due to the likelihood of a failure to repeat certain acts, or deformities in performances. Gender then, can be seen as an “assignment” which is never carried out precisely according to expectation, and consequently one never quite inhabits the gender ideal s/he is compelled to approximate (Butler, 1993:231). This performative conceptualisation of gender is a useful means of moving away from an understanding of gender as prescribed, fixed and static, to a reconceptualisation of gender as “a constituted *social temporality*” (Butler, 1990:141, emphasis in original).

Whilst Goffman (e.g. 1959) and Butler’s (e.g. 1990) approaches to performance have typically been deployed individually in the alcohol studies literature, Demant and Järvinen (2006:590) combine their theoretical perspectives when seeking to show how alcohol experience and positive attitudes towards drinking are used to symbolise maturity; the teenagers who consume the most alcohol construct themselves as “socially older” than others. Further, Malbon (1999), with a focus on clubbing, fuses Goffman’s (e.g. 1959;1967) recognition of the role for territorialisations and regionalisations with Butler’s (e.g. 1990;1993) understanding that social identity and self is concurrently performed. Malbon (1999) suggests that utilising both approaches can enhance understandings as to how the consuming experience of the crowd can simultaneously be expressive (Goffman), and constructive (Butler). Performative conceptualisations of drinking identities are beneficial for understanding that drinking identities are not fixed and static, but take different forms, at different times, and in different spaces; this paper works at the intersection of both Goffman (1959) and Butler’s (1990) approaches to performing identities.

Performances of Masculinity and Alcohol Consumption

According to Connell (1995), there is a hierarchy of masculinities. At the top of this hierarchy is hegemonic masculinity, with qualities including heterosexuality, whiteness, physical strength, and the suppression of emotions, such as sadness. Below this, is complicit masculinity. This phrase refers to men who may not fit all of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, but equally they do not challenge it, as they receive some of the benefits of being male. We then have marginalised masculinity, in which men cannot access all the features of hegemonic masculinity, due to factors such as their race or disabilities, but still withhold emotions and may display physical strength (Connell, 1995). At the bottom of the Connell's (1995) hierarchy of masculinity is subordinate masculinity, in which men exhibit qualities that are oppositional to hegemonic masculinity, such as being physically weak, and showing sadness. Effeminate and gay men are considered exemplars of subordinate masculinity (Connell, 1995). David and Brannon (1976) outline four types of masculinity that they believe are guidelines for male sex roles, and which men must perform in order to be considered hegemonic males. First, "no sissy stuff", which suggests a distanced self from femininity, homophobia, and avoidance of emotions, appreciating the stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability. Second, "be a big wheel", where an individual strives for achievement and success and focuses on competition. Third, "be a sturdy oak", which is concerned with avoiding vulnerability, staying composed and in control and being tough. Fourth, "give 'em hell", where an individual acts aggressively to become dominant. David and Brannon (1976) presented these themes in recognition of the role society encourages men to play; that is, men are required to perform a false front in order to 'make it'.

Drawing on Butler's (1990) theory of gender as constituted performatively, Campbell (2000) examines how hegemonic masculinity may be achieved in the context of a pub. It is the author's

contention that, through the public performance of masculinity, dominant understandings of legitimate masculine behaviour are both reinforced and defended. Campbell (2000:562) coins the term “pub(lic) masculinity” to recognise the specificities of the performance as it relates to pub drinking, and the ways in which the practice is display-oriented and under constant public observation. The performative enactment of pub(lic) masculinity contains theatrical elements, what Campbell (2000:565, emphasis in original) terms “*conversational cockfighting*”. The author argues that, at such times, hierarchies of knowledge, and legitimacy are established, in which other drinkers scrutinise men’s performances. Further, Campbell (2000) contends that, for male drinkers, it is important to have discipline when consuming large quantities of alcohol, in order to ensure the appearance of self-control is maintained. The performance thus requires that a man controls both the social and bodily aspect of pub(lic) masculinity. Having cohered literature surrounding the performances of masculinities when bound up with the consumption of alcohol, this paper now outlines the methodology.

Methodology

In this section, we first provide an overview of the case study locations, before going on to detail the methods deployed in this study.

Wythenshawe

Wythenshawe, a suburban area in Manchester, UK, was created in the 1920s as a Garden City in an attempt to resolve Manchester’s overpopulation problem and depravation in its inner-city slums. Wythenshawe continued to develop up to the 1970s. However, the 1980s and 1990s saw steady decline, high unemployment, decaying infrastructure, crime and drug abuse problems (Atherton et al. 2005). The area is dominated by white working-class drinking cultures. There are distinct neighbourhoods within Wythenshawe, along with a town centre with various shops,

supermarkets, hairdressers, pubs, and a club. Wythenshawe is a district eight miles south of Manchester city centre, and faced with relatively poor transportation links (Lucas *et al.*, 2009).

Chorlton

Chorlton is a residential area approximately five miles from Manchester city centre. It is a cosmopolitan neighbourhood with traditional family areas, alongside younger, vibrant communities. The area has good road and bus access to, and from, the city centre, and is situated within easy access to the motorway network. Drawing on data collect close to the commencement of research (September 2013-September 2014), Manchester City Council's (2012) detail that Chorlton has a higher proportion of minority ethnic residents in comparison to Wythenshawe, and compared to the national average (19.1%, compared to the national average of 11.3%). As of November 2011, private residential property in Chorlton accounted for 90.3% of all property in the ward, much higher than the Manchester average of 68.7%. group to pre-empt crime and anti-social behaviour in licensed premises.

These case study locations were chosen due to their differing socio-economic status, and their varying drinking micro-geographies; that is, different spaces and places for alcohol consumption. However, the importance of care and friendship to young people's drinking practices and experiences were important to participants from both case study locations, and seemed to transcend class and socio-economic differences.

Sampling / recruitment

This paper draws on findings from a larger study, conducted by the first author, which aimed to explore young people's (aged 15-24) alcohol consumption practices and experiences (see Wilkinson, 2015). This paper engages with findings from 16 young men, eight who live in Chorlton, and eight who live in Wythenshawe. I recruited the majority of participants through

non-coercive gatekeepers at local schools, community organisations, youth clubs and universities. In order to reach potential participants, I also distributed flyers and business cards to houses and businesses in both case study locations; posted on discussion forums concerning both areas; used Twitter and Facebook to promote my study to locals from each area; and arranged to be interviewed by the host of a local radio station in Wythenshawe.

Positionality

The first author speculates that being a young researcher (in her twenties) may have been advantageous in some respects. To explain, her age relative to those participants younger than herself is lower than that of an older researcher, and participants perhaps perceived her as being more ‘like them’ (see also Wilkinson, C., 2016), and thus were possibly more willing to divulge their drinking experiences and practices. It is of note that, as a female researcher, the young men in my study may have felt more able to talk about/express their drunken emotions than if a male researcher was present, due to strong associations between alcohol consumption and upholding hegemonic masculinity (Day *et al.*, 2003; Emslie *et al.*, 2013). Equally though, it may be worth considering that this may have meant male participants were more ‘conscious’ of how they present themselves to the first author, as a female researcher.

Methods

The first author had a ‘palette of methods’ to utilise (see Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018) and made it clear to the young people that they could ‘opt in’ to whichever method(s) they wished. As Holland *et al.* (2008, p. 19, emphasis in original) argue: ‘by enabling young people to choose how they wish to communicate with us we recognise them as social actors and begin to move our practice away from adult-centric procedures’. The methods we draw on in this paper include: in-depth individual and friendship group interviews; diaries; and participant observation of young people’s nights in/out involving alcohol.

Individual and Friendship Group Interviews

Individual interviews enabled us to gain insight into the participants' perceptions, which are subjective in nature (e.g. of their motivations for drinking, how they feel when they drink, where they like to drink) (Kaar, 2007). Whilst the individual interview has its benefits, there are also drawbacks. Despite the first author's relative closeness in age to participants, some young people did not feel comfortable participating in a one-to-one interview with an adult researcher, and asked to be interviewed with their friends. To address this, the first author implemented a friendship group style of interviewing. She had not intended to use this method; this illustrates the agency of participants to shape the research design, and the need for researchers to be flexible.

There are advantages of conducting interviews in friendship groups for substance use research. Friendship group interviews create a non-threatening and comfortable atmosphere for participants to share drinking experiences (Renold, 2005). Moreover, friendship group interviews provide access to interaction between participants (Miller *et al.*, 2010) - this helped tease out the importance of friendship and care to young men's drinking practices. Overall, friendship group interviews allowed the first author to collect data that otherwise may not have been accessible (Miller *et al.*, 2010).

Diaries

Diaries are a method through which young people can express themselves, perhaps with less embarrassment, or fewer feelings of being judged, than in interview scenarios. The first author asked participants to complete unstructured solicited written diaries, regarding their alcohol consumption experiences, over a minimum of three weeks. Leyshon (2002) contends that utilising a written diary method with young people is challenging, as they perceive it to be

time-consuming and it may feel like a form of homework. However, far from a tedious homework-like task, for some young men in the study, keeping a diary was novel and exciting.

Diaries yield considerable benefits for substance use research. First, as the diary method was not undertaken face-to-face, it made it easier for young men to be more candid about their drinking practices and experiences than in face-to-face methods (Milligan, 2005). Second, by enabling participants to document their own drinking practices, in their own space and time, a more empowering research relationship emerged between young people and the researcher. One of the drawbacks of using diaries is that several young people opted to participate in this method, yet never returned their diaries. An additional downfall with using diaries for research is that they depend on the participant's writing skills (Buchwald *et al.*, 2009). Relatedly, the first author was often disappointed by the limited detail some of the completed diaries contained.

Participant Observation

The first author conducted participant observation over a period of 12 months, in a diverse range of spaces, including: pubs, bars, clubs, casinos, streets, parks, and homes, and for a variety of occasions, including routine nights out, to more celebratory occasions, such as an 18th birthday party. By “hanging out” with participants (Kusenbach, 2003:463), the first author was able to explore young people's drinking experiences as they moved through, and interacted with, their surroundings. By joining young people as they moved in, and between, different spaces, the first author acquired an understanding of young people's embodied drinking practices, and the multi-sensory nature of drinking experiences (Langevang, 2007). Such visceral insights are not easily obtained through other methods.

Data analysis

With regard to analysing interviews, diaries, and field notes, the first author adopted the manual method of coding by pen and paper, perceiving that computer-assisted qualitative data analysis can distance the researcher from the data (Davis and Meyer, 2009). Initially, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) three stage model, a process of data reduction occurred, whereby the first author organised the mass of data and attempted to meaningfully reduce this. Second, the first author undertook a continual process of data display in the form of a table. Third, the first author undertook a process of conclusion drawing and verification. Participants feature in this paper through pseudonyms, so as to conceal their identities. Yet, in order to contextualise quotations, genuine ages and locations are given.

Findings

Herein, we discuss two thematic areas arising from the data: hegemonic masculinity and threatened masculinity, respectively.

Hegemonic masculinity

Many young men in the study, from both Chorlton and Wythenshawe, drew heavily on hyper-masculine gender constructs when discussing their drinking experiences. Take the diary entry from Rex below:

Whilst on the dance floor, and talking to a couple of girls, Carl accidentally bumped into a young teenager wearing a cap, and he took it personally. He was shouting and pushed Carl, who was ready to punch him. I stood in the way and politely told the other lad to “fuck off if he knew what was good for him”. Countless vodkas later, the night came to an end and we exited the club, only to find that the aforementioned aggressive lad was waiting with 3 friends. Me and Carl walked around the corner, where they followed us and decided to start a fight. After a minor scrap, the 4 lads ran away, and me and Carl entered the takeaway next door victorious.

(Rex, 24, Chorlton, diary)

Through Rex’s front-stage (Goffman, 1959) performative account of this event, he portrays himself as conforming to key attributes associated with a ‘give ‘em hell’ hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; David and Brannon, 1976), including aggression and physical strength (Day *et al.*, 2003a) as he managed to fight off “4 lads”, in what he trivialises as a “minor scrap”. The diary extract is written in a humorous tone, despite involving events that may be perceived as unpleasant. Indeed, this account contradicts Fjaer’s (2012) contention regarding young people’s interactions during hangovers, in which the author argues that fights are rarely events young people recognise as positive. Instead, Rex’s account lends credence to Tutenges and Sandberg’s (2013) recognition that stories involving alcohol consumption, followed by acts of transgressions, including fighting, are recounted by some young people with amusement or pride. Indeed, there may be an element of “over-claiming” in this account, in which Rex is embellishing the alcohol-related activities of his peer group (Johnson, 2013).

Alongside recounting stories containing fights, other young men in my study downplayed the care they undertake for friends on their nights out. Take the comments from Tim and Scott below:

I don't think boys care. I think boys try to be a bit more macho, or they're in control. So no. I mean, sometimes your mate can tell you're getting a bit too pissed and try and stop you. So that probably just starts to make you drink a bit more.

(Tim, 19, Chorlton, interview)

I could be twisted as I want yeah, I could be stumbling, and not one person has helped me. I would always keep up. I could fall over, and stand back up

(Scott, 18, Wythenshawe, friendship group interview)

In the above quotations, young men claim to assert autonomy and independence on nights out, citing a lack of need for care and thus can be seen to draw on notions of "hard masculinity" (Lyons and Willott, 2008:706). Indeed, for Tim, attempting to help a drunken male friend can be counterintuitive - as it may serve to spur them on to drink more. Drawing on David and Brannon's (1976) typology, Tim and Scott are displaying traits of a "no sissy stuff" masculinity - claiming that boys do not care, and thereby distancing themselves from care, which is stereotypically a feminine pursuit. Rather than displaying emotions, the young men are positioning themselves as "sturdy oaks" (David and Brannon, 1976), as they are presenting themselves and other men as being tough and in control, despite the impacts of alcohol consumption.

When young men did speak about caring for friends, sometimes it served to emphasise their physical strength, as John and David demonstrate:

My mate passed out in the bath tub, I had to lift him out of the bath tub, and bearing in mind he's six foot two, and built out here, it wasn't the easiest thing to do, and then I had to walk him home.

(John, 22, Wythenshawe, diary)

My flatmate got so drunk that his legs couldn't support his weight, so I had to carry him home and put him into bed, so I had him over my shoulder.

(David, 21, Wythenshawe, diary)

In the above excerpts, John describes lifting his drunken “six foot two”, well-built friend, whilst Dan describes carrying his intoxicated friend over his shoulder. Both John and David, by conforming to hegemonic, heterosexual standards for identity can be seen to be operating within the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990:151).

In addition to using the discussion of care to make explicit their physical strength, some young men produced their masculine identity *relationally* in their role as protectors of women. By positioning women as in need of care, men simultaneously established their own masculinity (see Day, 2001):

I think if you go out in a mixed gender [group], or I certainly drink less cos I think, especially when there's girls, you know, if some of the girls wandered about by themselves, you know, you want to sort of make sure they're alright and nothing happens to them. Whereas if it's just all guys then you're all just encouraging people to get drunk, so I think especially when it's mixed you sort, or I think the guys I know all try and stay less drunk to sort of make sure everyone's alright, cos I know a lot of my friends go out clubbing have tried to be touched up by random men in clubs, and some of them can't really, you know, say no to them.

(Tim, 19, Chorlton, interview)

Tim moderates his alcohol consumption when in female company (consistent with findings in Harnett *et al.*'s, 2000 study). This is because he considers that young women may “wander” off by themselves, or be “touched up by random men” in public spaces. By positioning public spaces as dangerous, and young women as endangered in such spaces, Tim creates a stage for

his performance of masculinity (see Day, 2001). Along with supporting socially ascribed ideals of masculinity, this paper now goes on to explore how alcohol can also threaten it (Thurnell-Read, 2013).

Threatened Masculinity

The notion that alcohol can threaten hegemonic masculinity can be explained by drawing on Butler's (1988:519) contention that gender is not a stable identity; rather, gender is constituted in time through a "stylized repetition of acts". As gender is performative, and gendered identities do not pre-exist performances of them, identities are, for Butler (1990), profoundly uncertain. In the below quotations, we can see that in opposition to some of the contentions made by participants in the quotations above, young men *do* care for their friends on nights out:

There's a friend a couple of years ago who was really drunk and he was saying that he was going to jump in Platt pond and go for a swim, he was that drunk, and he was crawling on the floor, so I had to take him aside, sat him down, got him some water, and I just sat with him there for an hour and a half, just trying to talk to him. It was winter as well, so it was a good job I was there or it could have been a bad way for him.

(Lewis, 20, Wythenshawe, interview)

I've had friends when they've been at house parties and they've fallen asleep in the bathroom, been sick on themselves, or they've fallen asleep by the toilet, or some of them get too pissed in the nightclub and you have to get them home. But I mean they do it for you so you've just got to look out for each other. I think that's why it's probably best to go out drinking with your friends because if anything happens they'll look after you. At house parties I've been a bit worse for wear and they've had to put me to bed.

(Thomas, 19, Chorlton, interview)

I'll just be like standardly drunk, and everyone else will just be like mortal, like properly bad. Cos I normally look after people when they're drunk, cos it's not nice when you're not getting looked after.

(Rik, 15, Wythenshawe, interview)

In the above quotations, Lewis, Thomas, and Rik emphasise the importance of looking after friends during nights in / out involving alcohol consumption, including: sitting with them, and talking to them; encouraging friends to drink water; and assisting friends to bed. Indeed, Rik claims to moderate his alcohol consumption, and only get “standardly drunk”, in order to look after heavily intoxicated friends. By undertaking caring duties for friends, Lewis, Thomas, and Rik fail to distance themselves from the feminine activity of care, and are thus engaging in “sissy stuff” (David and Brannon, 2979). Moreover, through the above quotations, the young men position their friends as vulnerable, and in need of care. The presentation of the behaviour of their friends thus departs from the “sturdy oak” ideal of masculinity detailed by David and Brannon (1979).

There is a stereotypical dichotomy in which self-disclosure and emotional intimacy through talk are thought to be key elements of female friendship styles, whilst men's friendship styles are characterised by inarticulate companionship and practical support (Bowlby, 2011).

Richardson (2015:158) posits that deep-seated emotions are rarely articulated by men; if they are, the man may be accused of being “in touch with his feminine side”. However, my data below, demonstrate that alcohol can facilitate “slippage” and transgressions in gender performances (Butler, 1993:122):

I get a bit gushy when drunk, like my mate, he’s dead clever, and he’s dead hard-working, and he’s really down on himself, he was going on about it the last time we were both drunk, and I just said “do you know what? You’re brilliant” just, went on for about twenty minutes, and everyone was just sat there like “Jesus, are you two going to kiss, or what?” Yeah it was, I think it’s just that, just saying things I wouldn’t usually say.

(David, 21, Wythenshawe, interview)

When sober in the car park at the start of the night, Carl and Danny were very quiet, and appeared to be relatively devoid of emotion, they weren’t particularly physically affectionate towards one another. However, later in the night, and multiple swigs of whisky later, Carl told Danny he “loved him”, and that he was “perfect”, his “best mate in the whole wide world”.

(Field diary, 6/12/2013, night out with Vera, Milly, Danny, Carl, 15-17, Wythenshawe)

From the above excerpts, one can see that alcohol enabled David and Carl to exhibit a lack of control and restraint over their emotions (see Thurnell-Read, 2013), getting “gushy”. Here, one can see the fragility of the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990:151). The consumption of alcohol opens up spaces of resistance to the ‘heterosexual matrix’, enabling David and Carl to carve out distance from heteronormative practices.

As the above demonstrates, Carl practiced what may be termed ‘transgressive’ masculinity, by failing to comply with the “masculine norms” of “controlling and restricting expression of

emotion” (Iwamoto and Smiler, 2013:371). Further to this, Carl fails to conform to the masculine norm of “striving to appear heterosexual” (Iwamoto and Smiler, 2013:372), by kissing his male friend on the lips. This can be seen in the following extract from my field diary:

Carl started stating that he loved his mum and his little baby brother and that he wanted to go home and kiss him. Carl then kissed Danny on the lips, just a little kiss, but something I got the impression he wouldn't have engaged in without the influence of alcohol. Vera and Milly remarked that Carl was very sweet, and Vera stated that she wished Milly was this affectionate when drunk.

(Field diary, 6/12/2013, night out with Vera, Milly, Danny, Carl, 15-16, Wythenshawe)

From the above, it is evident that embodiment of drunkenness helped Carl to articulate and express his emotions - both in talk and touch - thereby simultaneously threatening the male body, which is typically identified as being associated with control and boundedness. This closeness, touching and physicality between men is an act often considered to transgress the performance of normative gendered expectations (see Waitt *et al.*, 2011). My findings thus support Thurnell-Read's (2013) contention that, for younger drinkers, the ties between drinking and maintaining a bounded, controlled, male body may not be so clear. Drinking with friends allowed Danny to 'turn a blind eye' to Carl's non-hegemonic practices, such as kissing him (see Emslie *et al.*, 2013). As Emslie *et al.* (2013) recognise, drinking with friends is often thought to promote excessive drinking. However, the above lends credence to Emslie *et al.*'s (2013) contention, although based on pub-space, that drinking with friends can also have health-promoting behaviours, by enabling young people to share emotions, thereby potentially safeguarding their psychological wellbeing.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the complexity and diversity of masculinity in the lives of young men, and the relationships between these aspects, and the consumption of alcohol. This paper has brought to the fore the boundaries of masculinities, from conforming to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), right through to engaging in “sissy stuff” (David and Brannon, 1979). In doing so, this paper has highlighted how both conscious (Goffman, 1959) and unconscious (Butler, 1990) gender performances shape, and are shaped by, drinking.

That is, this paper has highlighted that some young men’s front stage performances of their masculinities written in diary entries, and verbally articulated during interviews, served to promote the notion that they are hegemonic males (Connell, 1995), and as such that they do not care for friends on nights out. When young men did speak about caring for friends, often it sought to emphasise their physical strength, or to position themselves as protectors of women. However, for other young men, care was seen to be a fundamental constituent of their nights out with friends, and took a variety of forms such as talking; sitting with; obtaining water; and putting to bed. It was largely through participant observation that insight was gleaned into the “sissy stuff” (David and Brannon, 1979); that is, the emotional care, both through talk and touch, that young men provide for their friends on nights out.

As this paper has highlighted, the popular press is currently replete with headlines contending that young people are ‘turning their backs on alcohol’ (BBC, 2018), and questioning whether drinking is becoming as socially unacceptable as smoking (Guardian, 2018). Meanwhile, the findings from this paper show that alcohol consumption can allow for ‘slippages’ and transgressions in men’s performances of masculinity (Butler, 1990), enabling men to share and release emotions. Drinking together could thus be considered to potentially safeguard young men’s psychological wellbeing. These findings have important implications, considering

12.5% of men in the UK are suffering from one of the common mental health disorders (Men's Health Forum, 2017); just over three out of four suicides are by men; with suicide being the biggest cause of death for men under 35 (Office for National Statistics, 2017). This paper thus contends that there is a need for multi-disciplinary research to be conducted into the implications of not drinking as the new norm.

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The work described has not been published previously; it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere; its publication is approved by all authors and tacitly or explicitly by the responsible authorities where the work was carried out, and that, if accepted, it will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or in any other language, including electronically without the written consent of the copyright-holder.

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