



CREATING CREDIBLE 'RESPONSIBLE DRINKING' IDENTITIES

Marie-Louise Fry, Griffith University

## ALCOHOL POLICY

- ⊙ Hallmark of contemporary alcohol policy advocates creating less harmful drinking cultures
  - ⊙ Encouraging & convincing individuals and communities to make responsible choices about drinking
    - ⊙ UK: Safe, Sensible, Social : The next steps in the national Alcohol Strategy
    - ⊙ Australia:
      - ⊙ National Alcohol Policy 2006-2009 (extended to 2011);
      - ⊙ National Prevention Taskforce - Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020
    - ⊙ Centres: ICAP, Drinkaware (UK), Drinkwise (Aust)
    - ⊙ Alcohol companies
- ⊙ Key features, operating alongside traditional harm reduction strategies
  - ⊙ Creating safer & healthier drinking cultures through de-normalising intoxication
  - ⊙ Challenging current attitudes regarding the acceptability of drunkenness & related anti-social behaviour
  - ⊙ Building a national consensus regarding healthy alcohol consumption

## THIS STUDY...

- ⊙ What is less well understood, and largely rendered **invisible**, is an examination of those who **practice responsible consumption of alcohol or to abstain completely**
  - ⊙ That other '70%' who do not consume alcohol to excess (AIHW 2005)
  - ⊙ Nairn et al 2006; Piancentini & Banister 2006
- ⊙ This study aimed to:
  - ⊙ understand the relationship bw social identity and consumption as a process and practice through which responsible drinking identities are constructed
  - ⊙ gain insight into how responsible drinkers negotiate alcohol-infused environments

## SOCIAL IDENTITY

- ⊙ Construction of identity = dynamic representation of self which is continually reassembled, produced and re-produced (Shanker et al 2009)
- ⊙ Individuals interact with vast array of symbolic and cultural resources within contemporary culture to construct representations of their possible selves
  - ⊙ Accoutrements of use & competence of behaviours lay the foundations & ascriptions of identity
  - ⊙ Consumption ritual – repeated performances enables the individual to validate their identity position
- ⊙ For identities to be intelligible to others people must gain recognition and validation from others (Butler, 2004)
  - ⊙ In-group / out-group comparisons
- ⊙ Jenkins (2004) reciprocal relationship bw identity and culture where the interaction of social practice authenticates self identity & that self is implicitly embedded in social practice
  - ⊙ Interconnection between production and development of individual identities with social consumption practices where the individual self becomes inseparable from the parallel development of the collective social identity (Elliott 2004)

## APPROACH & METHOD

- ⊙ Narrative theory approach
  - ⊙ Explores 'lived experiences' & 'telling of stories'
- ⊙ Interviews: 48 young adults aged 18-25 years
  - ⊙ M = 21; F = 27
- ⊙ Location: east coast Australia
- ⊙ Self identified as:
  - ⊙ Non-drinkers (n=18)
    - ⊙ Did not consume alcohol
    - ⊙ Disliked aroma of alcohol and behavioural/social effects
  - ⊙ Infrequent drinker (n=30)
    - ⊙ Placed limits on consuming alcohol
    - ⊙ Drank within recommended limits
    - ⊙ Engaged responsible drinking practices eg: not drink & drive
    - ⊙ Drank alcohol for social inclusion
    - ⊙ Did not drink on weekly basis

## LEGITIMISING IDENTITY WITHIN CULTURE OF INTOXICATION

- ⊙ Cognisant they were not part of mainstream where drinking to get drunk is the norm
- ⊙ Decision to drink sensibly influenced by their perception of positive/negative consequences derived from consumption practices
  - ⊙ not vomiting, not having a hangover, operating clearly the next day
  - ⊙ saving oneself; being responsible; being a good citizen
  - ⊙ found it difficult not to be judgemental towards those to drink to excess
  - ⊙ Visual representation of the drunken body as abject (Nairn et al 2006)
- ⊙ Strong sense of ensuring they were not 'like those who go out and just get drunk' – classification as different, as an out-group
- ⊙ Avoiding states of intoxication were constructed from broader life ambitions
  - ⊙ Healthy/sport subject position
  - ⊙ Academe subject position
  - ⊙ Religious subject position

## HEALTHY/SPORT SUBJECT POSITION

- ⊙ legitimised within discourses elaborating on the:
  - ⊙ physical and mental impacts of sporting health and wellbeing;
  - ⊙ preparedness for sporting engagements and participating as part of a team.
  
- ⊙ *'I play in the junior football comp... I have to have my wits about me...friends rib me about leaving early or not going out during the season... I'm not a big drinker anyway .. and kinda like having sport as an excuse to leave!' (Male)*

## ACADEME SUBJECT POSITION

- ⊙ the potential impact on the future in terms of opportunities lost or gained was paramount
  
- ⊙ loss of licence, police conviction, loss of independence and limiting professional opportunities were of central concern.
  
- ⊙ *'I'd hate to think that I couldn't do something in my life cause I'd done something stupid... like get caught for drink driving!. I'm studying to be a lawyer and having a conviction would destroy that... it's just not worth it! I couldn't imagine having to deal with something like a police conviction let alone having to tell my family.'* (Female)

## RELIGIOUS SUBJECT/POSITION

- ⊙ facilitated legitimacy for inclusion within a specific community bound by rules, beliefs and moral structure where the construction of an alternate subject position is related to cultural beliefs embedded within broader society.
- ⊙ *'My religious beliefs are a central part of my identity and I choose not to drink ... well not drink till I'm out of it. Generally I just have a beer every now and then and usually I just drink cause I'm out and it's socially acceptable to have something in your hand.'* (Male)

## MANAGING ALCOHOL INFUSED ENVIRONMENTS

- ⊙ Intoxication culture avoidance
- ⊙ Integration without alcohol )
- ⊙ Integration with alcohol )
- ⊙ Responsibility role identification )

Self-manage involvement in alcohol infused environments

## INTOXICATION CULTURE AVOIDANCE – NON- DRINKER

- ⊙ Socialising beyond, rather than within, alcohol-infused environments enabled participants to purposefully construct their identity position through ‘avoidance’
- ⊙ repeated avoidance strategy performances resulted in identity construction of a ‘them’ versus ‘us’, exclusionary, ‘not belonging’ perspective
- ⊙ *‘I avoid all interaction with night time entertainment... it just gets boring when people drink, get drunk and do stupid things. I like to engage in experiences with people’ (Female)*

## INTEGRATION WITHOUT ALCOHOL – NON DRINKER

- ⊙ implicit in the acceptance of the non-drinker within the drinking group was the invisibility of the individual’s non-drinking identity, thus enabling *integration without alcohol*.
- ⊙ Active participation in IE but not drinking contravenes social convention & challenges the stereotypical view of a non-drinker
- ⊙ although non-drinkers were viewed as ‘somewhat different’ by their non-drinking status, there was a parallel level of acceptance that non-drinkers can also be ‘cool’ and ‘fun’.
- ⊙ non-drinking status was overshadowed by the individual’s personality as ‘hyper’. This acceptance illustrates successful management of individual expectations, both drinkers and non-drinkers within group situations.
- ⊙ *‘When people realise I’m not drinking they look stunned...can’t believe it. We always get into a bit of an argument but finally they realise I really don’t want to drink... more importantly they accept that I don’t drink. That’s not to say they don’t try to get me to drink...’ (Male)*

## INTEGRATE WITH ALCOHOL- INFREQUENT DRINKER

- ⊙ renders the infrequent drinker as invisible
- ⊙ enables 'ease of access' within the drinking culture, rather than opposing the dominant norm
- ⊙ Subsuming to the practice of drinking to maintain veil of invisibility illustrates management of belonging and identification without challenging the dominant norm
  - ⊙ Allows drinkers to misread their identity while refraining from excessive consumption
- ⊙ Strategies: 'the rouse'
  - ⊙ holding a drink, 'filling up' drinks with soft drink, counting drinks, or swapping partners empty glass.
  - ⊙ Alcohol vessel represented central element signifying membership  
the accoutrement of use
- ⊙ *'So long as you're holding something that looks like it should hold alcohol... I usually just fill a glass of wine with soda and no-one knows it's not alcohol!' (Female)*

## RESPONSIBLE ROLE IDENTIFICATION

- ⊙ assumes a functional role such as designated driver or group carer.
  - ⊙ concerns centred on protective functions by allocating a minder, being vigilant about drink spiking, taking care of inebriated friends and ensuring a strategy to arrive home safely.
- ⊙ moral values and respect for friends was paramount.
- ⊙ assumption of roles augmented a non/infrequent drinkers' subject position strengthening their affiliation with friends, as well as fulfilling their personal values.
- ⊙ *'I think you have to be more aware of things that might happen to you when you go out drinking. I don't mind taking on the role of carer... I don't really drink that much anyway. I just wouldn't want anything to happen to my friends' (Female)*

## DISCUSSION

- ⊙ Demonstrates complexity bw an individual's legitimate non/infrequent drinking subject position and collective space where interaction, or non-interaction, with the intoxication culture occurs
- ⊙ Evident for non-drinkers
  - ⊙ subject positions legitimised their out-group identity
    - ⊙ Substantiated their view of 'being different from the cultural norm' that is dependent on a specific set of sub-cultural capital
  - ⊙ In terms of managing the intoxicated environment
    - ⊙ Avoidance: validates non-drinker's in-group identity
- ⊙ However it is also evident that non-drinker and in-frequent drinkers successfully managed the intoxicated environment:
  - ⊙ Integration in IE: transcends out-group identity
    - ⊙ IE accepted as part of contemporary culture where socialisation occurs; not an exclusionary space
    - ⊙ Continues the process of producing and re-producing identity within collective social space
    - ⊙ Illustrates how the behaviour of those who oppose the dominant norm can infiltrate intoxicated spaces

## WHY EXAMINE SENSIBLE DRINKING...

- ⊙ Govt policy reflects cultural change , yet creating a culture of responsible drinking
  - ⊙ Cultural emphasis reflects long term change
  - ⊙ Intersection of responsible/at-risk drinking & relevance for social change
    - Eg: champions of cool – influence of non-drinkers infiltrating drinking environments
- ⊙ Future directions:
  - ⊙ Greater understanding of socio-cultural influences, esp in Australian context
    - Interrelationship bw individual / practice / culture
  - ⊙ Examination of responsible drinking – it's meaning and relevance to youth
  - ⊙ Engaging a wider dialogue beyond a sole focus only on those who drink offers valuable insight into the motivations for opposing the powerful norm of drunkenness-oriented drinking.