

# **'Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself': Loss of (self)-consciousness and loss of memory in young people's drinking narratives**

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Published in *Sociology*, (2009), 43 (3), 457-476.

## **Abstract**

Young people's alcohol consumption has been the focus of heightened concern over 'binge drinking' in social policy, academic research and popular culture. A normalised culture of intoxication is now central to many young people's social lives, playing an important role in the night-time economy of towns and cities across the UK. In this paper we draw on the findings of a study on the significance of alcohol consumption in the everyday lives of 'ordinary' young adult drinkers to explore the significance of loss of consciousness and loss of memory in their drinking stories. Through an analysis of focus group discussions with 89 young women and men aged 18 to 25, we explore the role of 'passing out stories' in the classed and gendered domain of young people's alcohol consumption in the neo-liberal social order focussing on the constitution of risk and pleasure in their accounts.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to the editor and four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

## **Keywords**

Alcohol; binge; consumption; drinking; gender; narrative; sexuality; youth

## Introduction

Contemporary popular culture in the UK is replete with narratives of young people drinking to excess. Health education initiatives generally constitute young people's alcohol consumption as a potential source of risk and harm, representing young drinkers as in need of help and treatment (eg. [www.knowyourlimits.gov.uk](http://www.knowyourlimits.gov.uk); Hackley et al., in press). Most advertising and marketing campaigns by the major drinks manufacturers represent young people's drinking as a source of pleasure, camaraderie, fun and adventure (eg. [www.thechoiceisyours.com](http://www.thechoiceisyours.com); Nayak, 2006). More voyeuristic narratives in TV programmes such as 'Britain's Streets of Booze' (BBC1, 2005), or 'Booze Britain' (Bravo satellite channel, 2005-6) constitute young people's drinking as a source of entertainment and as a spectacle of excess. It is commonly argued in the alcohol research literature that young people are being seduced into a culture of normalised excessive drinking, whilst simultaneously being pathologised as disordered and disorderly 'binge drinkers' (Measham and Brain, 2005).

The recent discourse of anxiety and censure over young people's alcohol consumption revolves around a particular concern with 'binge drinking' amongst 18 to 25 year olds. Although the academic and policy literatures draw on several different definitions of the term 'binge' (2), this lack of consensus over what constitutes a 'binge' has scarcely impinged on the force of the term in official discourses of youthful excess (Szmigin et al., 2007). The UK National Alcohol Strategy cites research that defines 'binge drinking' as 'feeling drunk at least once a month', and identifies 'binge drinkers' as 'those who drink to get drunk, (...) likely to be aged under 25' (Cabinet Office, 2007: 4). The main onus is on young drinkers, rather than the alcohol industry or the retail trade, to change their drinking practices and reduce their alcohol consumption (Measham, 2006).

Research on young people's alcohol consumption indicates a pattern of increased sessional heavy drinking in the UK from the early 1990s, with recent evidence that this trend is starting to level off (Measham, 2008). Some researchers have identified a polarisation of drinking patterns amongst young people aged under and over 18, with growing numbers of abstainers and occasional drinkers, alongside what Martinic and

Measham (2008) have termed 'extreme' drinkers (see also Piacentini and Banister, 2008). This polarisation of alcohol consumption does not (yet) appear to have undermined the pervasive culture of 'determined drunkenness' in which drinking to intoxication is a normal part of many young people's social lives.

Measham and Brain (2005) cite several key developments over the past twenty years as contributors to what they term the 'new culture of intoxication' amongst young drinkers in the UK. The emergence of rave and dance culture in the late 1980s saw a shift from the use of alcohol to dance drugs such as ecstasy and the alcohol industry responded by recommodifying alcohol as a psychoactive product targeted at a more diverse group of young consumers. From the early 1990s, a wider range of products appeared, designed to appeal to young adults as 'psycho-active consumers' (Brain et al., 2000). These include FABs (flavoured alcoholic beverages); RMDs (spirits-based ready-to-drink mixers such as Bacardi Breezer, the market leader); 'buzz' drinks based on legally available substances such as caffeine (eg. Red Bull); and, more recently, cheap 'shots' of spirits and liqueurs, usually downed in one for an instant 'hit' (Measham, 2006). This coincided with an increase in the strength of traditional products such as wine and beers, and the increased availability of cheaper alcohol in promotional deals aimed at young drinkers. In addition, the retail trade has been transformed, with the emergence of café bars, dance bars and themed pubs in most city centres, broadening the traditional customer base well beyond the traditional pub clientele of white working class heterosexual men to include more culturally and sexually diverse groups in the 18 to 35 range (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001).

Given the considerable variation in sampling of respondents and methods of recording alcohol consumption levels, it is difficult to make definitive comparisons between young adults' drinking practices and attitudes to alcohol consumption in different countries, even around Europe. The largest longitudinal study of young people's self-reported alcohol consumption and attitudes to public drunkenness, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD; Hibell et al., 2003), indicates that British young people aged 15 to 16 report the highest levels of

drunkenness and positive attitudes to alcohol consumption in Europe, along with Denmark, Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands. This pattern is also found amongst legal age drinkers in the UK, whose consumption is characterised by weekday restraint and weekend excess (Measham, 2006). Although there are important national variations (see Measham, 2008 for further discussion), the impact of the global alcohol industry is reflected in a gradual homogenisation of young people's drinking practices as countries across Western Europe, North America and Australasia follow the British pattern (Room, 2005).

Although 'determined drunkenness' has become increasingly normative for young women and men across social class groups in the UK, the changing practices associated with young people's alcohol consumption are part of a much broader reconfiguration of class and gender in a neo-liberal (and post-feminist) social order (Skeggs, 2004), and drinking to excess remains heavily marked by gender, class and culture (Wilson, 2005). Whilst young women's reported levels of frequent drinking and drunkenness are still less than those of their male peers, young women's rate and level of alcohol consumption has increased over the past two decades (Plant, 2008). However, drinking to excess is still associated with traditional and working-class forms of masculinity (De Vissier and Smith, 2007; Gough and Edwards, 1998; Tomsen, 1997), whilst drunken women are still constituted as sexually 'loose' and unfeminine. The female 'binge drinker' is a particular signifier of female fecklessness and lack of self-control, and is generally marked as white, working-class and heterosexual. As Skeggs has argued, this figure 'has been highlighted as a significant threat, not only to the state of the nation, but also to herself' (2005: 967). In popular cultural discourse, the classed and gendered discourse of 'ladette culture', which is generally represented as an unfortunate consequence of feminism, has been constituted as a cause of 'binge drinking' amongst young women (Jackson and Tinkler, 2007).

There is a long history of ritualised drinking to excess amongst upper-class young men. However, this often takes place in the more secluded spaces of university colleges or private school grounds, and in the event of more public displays of drunken excess, this

elite group have the money to buy themselves out of trouble (Ronay, 2008). The upper class as a whole is seldom subject to the same level of horrified moral outrage and disgust that has been directed at the drinking practices of white working-class youth (Nayak, 2006; Saner, 2008). The night time economy in many of Britain's towns and cities is also segregated by class (and ethnicity) via a separation between social and commercial events and venues designated for 'students' and 'locals' (Holt and Griffin, 2005). 'Student' events are generally held on mid-week nights or in specific 'student' venues, in contrast to events for 'local' populations, which in most cities would include a substantial proportion of working-class young men and women (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001; Nayak, 2006). University students (who are predominantly white and middle-class) also engage in public displays of drunkenness in towns and cities across the UK (Piacentini and Banister, 2008), but the excessive, irresponsible, anxiety-provoking figure of the 'binge drinker' is generally marked as young, white and working-class.

### **Drinking in the neo-liberal social order**

In this paper we consider the significance of the increase in young people's 'extreme' drinking practices in relation to recent social, cultural and economic changes associated with neo-liberalism. We follow Steinberg and Johnson's view of neo-liberalism as a 'tendency to transformation which ... is affecting, in fundamental ways, the nature of social and economic relationships in our world, and also the forms of subjectivity or individuality in relation to collective life and social solidarities' (2003: 8). Theorists of neo-liberalism argue that the increasing importance of the 'biographical project of the self' carries with it a powerful (and new) form of governance (Rose, 1989). The authentic and fully-realised self is subject to continual (self-)surveillance, transformation and improvement, in a process that has long formed a central element of normative femininity, but is now, it is argued, being intensified and extended to masculinity (Walkerdine, 2003).

In the neo-liberal social order there is an imperative on individual subjects to construct and display themselves as distinctive, authentic selves, discerning consumers, and as

ethical subjects. If one behaves in ways that are taken to be excessive, unhealthy, irresponsible or undisciplined, then this is constituted as a moral failure of the self (Croghan et al., 2006). In this context, young people's public displays of drunken excess are constituted in governmental discourses as volitional acts of irresponsible excess, a willed entry into the realm of chaos, risk and danger and away from the rationality, self-control and moderation that is at the heart of neo-liberal subjectivity (O'Malley and Valverde, 2004). The process is also classed and gendered, and Savage (2003) has argued persuasively that the discerning, responsible neo-liberal subject is in fact a 'universal-particular' middle-class form. So whilst 'excessive' drinking practices might be condoned (within limits) amongst upper and middle-class men, for example in the initiation ('hazing') rituals of male university sports teams, public displays of determined drunkenness by young working-class men, and especially young working-class white women, are frequently constituted as the epitome of feckless excess (Skeggs, 2004).

However, the night-time economy also commodifies the pursuit of pleasure and hedonistic excess in bounded urban 'wild zones' that target a predominantly young adult consumer demographic (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007). Young people's consumption practices have been referred to as a form of 'calculated hedonism' (or 'controlled loss of control'), within the boundaries of a specific time (the weekend); place (a private party, or a club or bar within a 'wild zone'); company (a supportive friendship group); and intensity (Measham, 2004). The concept of 'calculated hedonism' combines discourses of discipline, (self-)control and enjoyment to mobilise pleasure as a governing category (Szmigin et al., 2007). There is a substantial sociological literature on 'disreputable pleasures' and 'the tendency of government policy to identify the pleasures of the lower classes and the poor as problems to good order' (O'Malley and Valverde, 2004: 25), but there is a continuing silence in governmental discourses on pleasure as a 'warrantable motive' for the consumption of drugs or alcohol. Within the harm minimisation model, only rational, civilized and above all moderate drinking is constituted as unproblematic, so drinking to intoxication cannot be linked to pleasure or to subjects of moral worth within the discourses of liberal governance. In this paper we

draw on data from a study of young people's alcohol consumption to explore narratives from within the culture of intoxication.

Sharing drinking stories that are collaboratively constructed plays a key role in young people's social lives, binding their friendship groups together in a highly gendered process (Engineer et al., 2003). For example, in a recent ethnographic study of fraternity drinking stories amongst male US college students, drunkenness was narratively constituted as a form of risk-taking in adventure stories; as entertainment (for others) in comic stories; and as a means of exploring physical limits, usually in stories of discovery involving themes of nakedness and exposure, urinating, vomiting, and/or sexual activity in the context of competitive drinking games (Workman, 2001). Drunkenness also appeared as a sexual trap for men in stories of regret at having had sex with 'the wrong girl' (Workman, 2001: 439), or what DeVissier and Smith's male respondents in their UK study referred to as 'a fucking ugly dog' (2007: 353).

Anoop Nayak (2006) has explored the pervasive panic over spectacular acts of masculine excess epitomised by the night-time activities and drinking culture of young white working-class men in the North-East of England. Nayak argued that the 'circuit-drinking' ritual (also known as the 'pub crawl' in other contexts) is an important collective drinking practice that formed the basis for the generation of 'funny stories'. These collectively produced narratives served to bind white working-class male social groups together, providing 'a sense of collective history and mutual experience' (2006: 819) that epitomised 'Real Geordie' (white, working-class, heterosexual) masculinity for a culture that was once tied to production, and has since been displaced to the arena of consumption (cf. Chatterton and Hollands, 2001). Relatively few studies have explored the role of drinking, and still less drinking stories, in young women's lives (Jackson and Tinkler, 2007). However, Sheehan and Ridge (2001) examined the use of narrative in Australian female secondary school students' stories about 'binge drinking', arguing that these young women used narrative to make sense of their drinking, which is heavily stigmatised, and 'any harm encountered along the way tends to be filtered

through the 'good story', brimming with tales of fun, adventure, bonding, sex, gender transgressions, and relationships' (2001: 347-8).

### **The 'Young People and Alcohol' study (3)**

This study explored the relationship between consumption and identity for young adults aged 18 to 25, focusing on accounts of 'everyday drinking' by 'ordinary' consumers, via 16 informal focus group discussions with 89 young adults in three geographical locations: a major city centre in the English Midlands with a diverse population ('Rowchester'); a seaside town ('Seatown') and a small market town ('Bolston') in the English West Country with more homogenous populations and a more limited range of drinking venues. Rowchester has a substantial night-time economy dominated by a wide range of bars and clubs aimed at a young adult clientele. It is ethnically and culturally diverse with a large student population and a degree of separation between the leisure spaces of predominantly white middle-class 'students' and more ethnically diverse but predominantly working-class 'locals' (Holt and Griffin, 2005).

This paper presents an analysis of focus groups conducted in 'Seatown' FE college, and with students at a nearby university in the small city of 'Avon' during 2005 and 2006. The Seatown participants were white British (self-definition) and working-class (by occupation and educational background), and the university students were white and middle-class. The paper also includes extracts from a discussion with students at a vocational FE college in 'Rowchester', involving young white women from working-class backgrounds. Participants were recruited through contacts with local colleges, and in most cases they were interviewed in friendship groups. Not all participants drank alcohol. Focus groups were facilitated by researchers in their twenties and thirties, with a view to putting participants at their ease when talking about their drinking practices (4), although the researchers were somewhat older than the respondents. Participants were informed that they were to be involved in a project looking at their social activities and were encouraged to talk about what they liked to do on a night out. Drinking was mentioned by participants as an important (although not essential) aspect of their social

lives at an early stage in all the group discussions. Focus group sessions lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and subsequently transcribed (5). In this analysis, we extracted narratives concerned with drinking from the interview transcripts, focussing in particular on those relatively common stories involving loss of memory, awareness and/or loss of consciousness, or what we term 'passing out stories'. These narratives usually involve relatively lengthy pieces of text, and we have space to examine only a limited number of stories in any depth, so the stories we explore below have been selected to represent common tropes in our participants' 'passing out stories'.

### **'It gives you banter for the next day': The role of drinking stories in young people's social lives**

Drinking stories played a central role in the social lives of our participants. In extract 1, Pip, a male university student, constitutes drinking as a source of 'banter' that provides a shared source of entertainment for his friendship group. In an earlier discussion with another group of university students in 'Rowchester' (extract 2), Carrie constructs this process in more negative terms, as producing an imperative 'to get drunk in order to share the funny stories'. Jude represents herself as 'separated' from the social world of her flat mates because she was not able to produce 'funny stories' about having done 'something stupid'.

Pip: it's it gives you it gives you banter for the next day so it was (.) it's great =

Int: = Yeah the thing (1) cos you said right at the beginning (.) the stories (1) so do you you (...)

Pip: oh no (1) (...) erm (1) so (.) it's just a case of (1) you have a lot of stories but everyone has a lot of stories so it's it's fun (1) it's a sharing experience

(Extract 1: Rowchester University: 3 white females, 1 white male, November 2006)

Carrie: you feel like you almost have to get drunk in order to (1) share the funny stories (1) cos next day you have them to talk about

Toni: Yeah

Jude: I never really got on with my flat mates in the first year because (1) they had all these funny stories about their drinking nights and I thought (2) here we go (right) (1) erm (2) and because of that (1) I was

- really kind of (1) separate (1) separated (1) and it was horrible (hmm  
hmm)
- Carrie: Yeah it's very much like that I think (.) it's all about like (.) what they  
(1) what everyone did last night (1) so in order to be in (.) if you like  
(.) you have =
- Int: = to have done something last night (laughter)
- Jude: Something stupid  
(Extract 2: Avon University, 4 white females, December 2005)

In extracts 1 and 2, stories from the culture of intoxication are constructed as a route to inclusion within student social life, but also as providing material for that social life. Individual participants positioned themselves in different ways here: Pip as an enthusiastic participant, and Carrie, Jude and Toni as marginal(ised) onlookers who were relatively critical of what they represented as an imperative to intoxication.

### **Courting risk, losing control and (re-)discovering the self**

An important element in young people's 'passing out stories' involved tales about the potential risks associated with drinking to loss of consciousness. The use of drinking as a means of courting risk and danger is a common element of youth cultural practices in the UK and elsewhere (Dobson et al., 2006). These practices are also highly gendered, often marking entry to adulthood for young men, and usually associated with the possibility of sexual assault for young women. The narrative quoted below from the same group as extract 2 involves an account of a female university student who has apparently passed out in the women's toilets due to drinking. The story is recounted as a tale set in the chaotic context of Freshers week, as a group of three 2<sup>nd</sup> year female undergraduates look back on this period of substantial alcohol consumption (6). The story is recounted by Toni in response to the researcher's earlier question asking for examples of 'a bad night out':

- Jude: it's what makes it a bad night (.) it's when I'm feeling (1) like I'm  
not in control and yet I'm (...) I don't know if they gonna drag me  
out and [
- Toni: [ well that's the thing (.) actually I remember in Freshers  
Week (1) on campus (1) and I was in the girls' toilet (2) and there  
was this poor girl and just (1) she must have just passed out in the  
toilet next door (1) and erm (.) the door was open and the girls

that were from her flat obviously were (1) sort of talking amongst themselves about what to do (1) and I mean she was in a hell of a (hmm) (.) she really was in a hell of a state (1) and one was going (.) well I don't know (.) I don't know (1) she lives (.) I don't know (.) I don't know what to do (2) and I went up to them and I said you can't just leave her there like that (yeah) (1) you've left the door open for one thing (1) like total exposed (.) it was just awful (.) and (.) you know (.) that's what I don't like (.) the thought of getting into that [

Int: [ state [  
Toni: [ where you actually have no control  
over what you're doing  
(Extract 3: Avon University: 3 white females, December 2005)

Toni characterises the anonymous drunken 'poor girl' as having 'just passed out', and as a consequence abnegated all responsibility for her welfare. Toni's story revolves around her remonstrations with the girl's flatmates, who were apparently reluctant to interrupt their own night out to take her home. The moral force driving the plot in Toni's story is the assumption that once the young woman had lost consciousness, responsibility for her welfare should pass to her flatmates. There was no apparent negative judgement of her responsibility for having drunk so much that she passed out: that state of affairs was viewed as unremarkable in the context of Freshers week. The moral of Toni's story can be read from the spectacle of the unconscious 'poor girl', acting as an exemplar of what might occur after drinking so much that you 'have no control over what you're doing'. In this story, the loss of self-control, loss of agency and loss of the ability to look after oneself associated with drinking to unconsciousness was associated with exposure to risks that were implicitly sexualised, even though the young woman had passed out in the relatively safe space of the women's toilets.

These young women characterised the loss of (self-)control associated with extreme drunkenness as highly undesirable, but one of the group (Alice) later recounted a 'passing out story' in which she had done something very similar:

Int: OK (1) Well we've only got a couple of questions left (1) has anybody ever passed out through drinking (3) no  
Jude: Not that I remember (Int. laughs)

- Alice: Kind of (.) well (.) yeah (.) I suppose (.) yeah passed out (1) fallen into a very deep sleep (right) (2)
- Int: and woken up in a very strange place
- Alice: Well I went to the toilet in a club in SXXX (1) like middle of (1) well the club was still going and everything (2) and I must have fallen asleep (2) and (1) erm (.) or passed out (.) either way (.) whatever (1) wasn't conscious (1) and erm (1) then there's a knock on the door (1) and I opened the door (.) and this bouncer was there (1) and he's like are you alright and I'm like [putting on voice] yeah I'm fine (.) absolutely fine (laughter) (1) got myself together (.) walked out into the club (.) and there was big steps going into the club (.) cos I walked all the way up the steps (.) all the lights were on (.) and they were cleaning (laughs)
- Int: Oh my
- Alice: And this bouncer was are you sure you're alright (1) I was like [puts on voice again] yep I'm fine (laughter) (1) I was so embarrassed (1) there was me pretending that everything was fine and I'd only like nodded off for like two minutes (.) I must have slept for about three hours
- (Extract 4: Avon University: 3 white females, December 2005)

Alice resisted the terminology of 'passing out', preferring to represent herself as having 'fallen into a very deep sleep', and her identification of herself as having 'passed out' is marked by considerable hesitation ('or passed out (.) either way (.) whatever (1) wasn't conscious'). Alice's narrative was presented as a funny story, with the punch line coming as she walked out of the toilets into the club to find the cleaners at work, recounted with laughter as she attempts to normalise her situation and pretend that everything is fine. These young white middle-class women distanced themselves from the potentially risky and humiliating loss of (self-)control associated with drinking to excess in different ways, and were therefore able to position themselves as respectable and responsible female subjects of moral worth.

### **Remembering and responsibility in young women's 'passing out stories'**

Not all of our female participants distanced themselves from the loss of (self-)control associated with heavy drinking. In extract 5, a group of young white working-class women at Seatown FE college treat Laura's story of 'a good night out' as a source of some amusement.

- Int: [ So your (...) (1) so a good night out for you would be (...) (1) I mean have you got a story of a good night out that you've had (2) recently or something?
- Laura: Um (1) not really apart from (.) a work party I went to where I kissed the most unpopular guy in the store and remember it (1) I had no control over it (laughter)
- Int: Presumably that wasn't the good bit (laughs)
- Laura: No
- Sara: She loved it really
- Laura: It was a fun night out but (.) I do regret that bit (1) but I remember the whole thing (.) it was (1) [ terribly funny
- Int: [So did you (1) so what made it good then (.) was is it (1) [ the company (...)?
- Laura: [I don't know (.) just the fact that I was just completely drunk and (1) didn't have a clue what I was doing and it was very funny (.) and then I woke up in the morning and remembered everything I'd done and it was quite amusing.
- Maria: I think we should [ put you into an AA meeting (laughter)  
(Extract 5: Seatown FE college: 7 white females, June 2006)

Like Alice in extract 4, Laura is occupying the position of the person who has done 'something stupid' when drunk in order to provide a source of entertainment for the group. Her lack of awareness and (self-)control means that she is able to represent herself as lacking any responsibility for her actions ('I didn't have a clue what I was doing'). Laura is therefore able to both transgress the bounds of respectable (middle-class) femininity without the potentially greater risks associated with losing consciousness, and without falling into the position of the feckless drunken working-class slag. The overall tone of Laura's tale is one of amusement at her own recalled memory of her exploits, tinged with only partial regret. Maria's comment about putting Laura 'into an AA meeting' (ie. Alcoholics Anonymous) marks the 'extreme' aspect of Laura's drunken activities, and is greeted by much laughter in the group.

It would be a mistake to conclude from these examples that young middle-class women distanced themselves from the culture of intoxication whilst young working-class women positioned themselves as more active participants, since this pattern was not reflected across our data as a whole. However, the dominant class and gender connotations associated with the drunken female subject meant that whilst relatively extreme 'passing out stories' were recounted in all our discussion groups, young white

working-class women would be the most likely to be constituted as the epitome of the feckless female 'binge drinker' (Skeggs, 2005). In contrast, our male participants did not represent their relationship to 'extreme drinking' with the same sense of hesitation or ambivalence.

**'Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself': Young men's narratives of 'determined drunkenness'**

For many of our male participants, drinking was frequently (but not always) represented as a deliberate practice in order to 'get absolutely annihilated', 'wasted', 'ended' or 'mullered', often (but not always) in the context of all-male drinking sessions. In extract 6, two white working-class young men (Matt and Grant) are involved in Grant's account of a very minimal 'passing out story' at Rowchester FE college. This narrative did not take the form of a funny drinking story recounted for the entertainment of friends (and the researcher), but emerged in response to a request for examples of 'any bad nights'.

- Int: So anybody else got any (1) any (.) well it doesn't have to be recently (.) just any bad nights that (.) spring to mind?
- Grant: Well as I say (.) there's one time I went out got a bit too drunk and woke up in hospital
- Int: You woke up in hospital?  
(inaudible cross talking)
- Matt: What were you (.) what were you in hospital for Grant=
- Grant: =I just err I must have passed out in the bathroom or something(.)
- Int: Oh right
- Grant: So I don't really remember a lot of it  
(Extract 6: Rowchester FE college: 1 Asian Male, 2 white females, 1 white/Jamaican male, 2 white males, March 2006)

Grant provided an account that he introduced as an episode in which he 'got a bit too drunk'. This is represented as leading, via a somewhat mysterious process, to the situation in which he 'woke up in hospital', and is set against an implicit norm of unremarkable drunkenness. Whilst Grant positions himself as responsible for his own drunken state ('I went out and got...'), he also draws on the 'passing out' trope to link the narrative to the point at which he woke up in hospital. His partial loss of memory



- Int: so have you got any (.) do you drink any drinks that you drink in a particular way? You've said about your mixing of drinks (.) does anybody drink anything (1) I know some people were talking about like sambuca and um
- Carl: like (.) no (.) well we drink sambuca (.) but this is like (.) I don't know (.) every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself
- Int: what's this then?
- Carl: (1) but like whenever we're pissed (.) like me and my mates in BXXX (1) we just end up going to the bar (.) and at some point we will all do a round of shots of sambuca (.) (right) (.) you've got to do them at the same time and everything (.) but like you do it after every pint after a while (.) and that makes you puke (.) it really does
- Int: right (1) so you do a pint and then a sambuca
- Carl: yeah (.) a pint and then a sambuca (.) and then like (.) maybe two sambucas
- Int: so how do you drink (.) do you?
- Carl: well you just all do it at the bar together (.) and it's like a group activity (.) isn't it
- Int: do you light it? Coz I've heard that some people light it
- Carl: yeah (.) no sometimes
- Brian: yeah (.) It goes into your hand and makes you gag
- Carl: and sometimes (.) but sometimes (.) you just can't be arsed  
(Extract 8: Seatown FE college: 6 white males, May 2006)

Carl's account is not a 'passing out story', but rather a narrative of an all-male 'group activity' in which the unpleasantness and extreme excess of such practices marked them out as masculine (DeVissier and Smith, 2007). Drinking in this way is associated with the visceral experience of disgust ('it makes you gag'), and has been viewed as a form of self-harm (eg. Workman, 2001). However, Carl mitigates against this interpretation by constituting such practices as voluntary ('sometimes you just can't be arsed'), that is, as a practice that one can decide *not* to engage in.

### **Tales of unremarkable but troubling excess**

Some 'passing out stories' emerged in dialogue form as participants recounted tales in response to questions from the researcher. In extract 9 Helen recounts a story which was clearly familiar to other members of the group in which she was taken to hospital by her friends, who then videoed the event on her mobile phone. This video was then circulated beyond the immediate friendship group to reach Michaela's brother: thereby giving it a wider currency.

Int: right (1) so you got taken to hospital when was that?  
 Helen: yeah...They videoed it on my phone  
 Michaela: oh (.) my brother's seen that  
 Int: oh my goodness (.) they videoed it on your [ phone?  
 Helen: [ (laughs) yeah (.) they thought it was hilarious  
 Int: so have you got (.) have you seen it then?  
 Helen: yeah... It was awful (1) we were in hospital and I was like this  
 having to go down a corridor banging my head on the wall...  
 Int: so how did you feel about seeing the video of yourself?  
 Helen: I was only just like going like this (pulls face/rolls eyes) (1) it was a  
 bit weird cos I didn't remember it  
 (Extract 9: Seatown FE college: 7 white females, June 2006)

The researcher expressed some shock that Helen's plight was recorded on her own mobile phone ('oh my goodness (.) they videoed it on your phone?'), and Helen managed any potential disapproval of these actions by emphasising the entertainment value of the video for her friends, whilst acknowledging the negative aspects of viewing the event herself ('it was awful'). The use of mobile phones to video or photograph episodes from the culture of intoxication is now a common feature of young people's leisure activities, and this plays an important role in the recounting of drinking stories 'after the event' - including 'passing out stories'. Helen constitutes this as 'a bit weird', referring to the possibility that anyone who loses consciousness or memory of their actions might see them replayed later, having been circulated amongst their friends, without their knowledge or consent.

## **Discussion**

We have focussed on young people's 'passing out stories' in this paper because such narratives epitomise the pervasive and normative character of 'determined drunkenness' in the new culture of intoxication (Measham, 2006). Our participants recounted stories of drinking to the point of losing consciousness, losing their memory of events, vomiting, and waking up in hospital, representing their actions when drunk as beyond their control, awareness and responsibility. Some of these practices were constituted as excessive, undesirable, unpleasant or 'weird', but they were also recounted as a source of entertainment as part of a 'fun' night out in the context of a

widespread culture of 'extreme drinking'. Young women struggled to manage the spectre of sexual assault, shame and the loss of respectable femininity associated with getting very drunk and passing out. Young men's 'passing out stories' were more straightforward tales of ritualised 'determined drunkenness', although young women also represented their alcohol consumption in this way, the language (and practices) were generally less extreme.

Story-telling as a practice is located in specific historical, cultural and political contexts, such that particular stories come to be told at particular moments by particular subjects or groups of narrators (Plummer, 1996). The recounting of drinking stories provides an important entrée into social life for young people. Such stories are told (and retold) for the entertainment of the friendship group, and serve to bind the group together (Nayak, 2006). They are also being recounted here for the benefit of the researcher in the context of a research encounter in which participants were asked to recount (and account for) their drinking practices. However, there is ample evidence that these were also familiar stories that were recounted on a regular basis within these friendship groups.

Sulkunen has argued that it is important to understand intoxication as a practice that 'is always transgressing the boundaries of cultured normality, even when it is highly ritualised and sanctioned' (2002: 266). The 'passing out stories' explored above are narratives of remarkable excess in which drinking to the point of loss of consciousness and loss of memory is represented as both relatively normal and as a remarkable event. Of course, young people drinking to intoxication and telling drinking stories are not novel phenomena. Courting risk through excessive drinking and as a form of carnivalesque spontaneity is a well-established and long-standing part of the path to adulthood for young people in many European cultures (Dobson et al., 2006). This provides a means of dealing with dilemmas of risk and responsibility, as well as a focus for humour, group solidarity, fun and entertainment. We would argue that young people's drinking is now taking place within the economic and the cultural context of neo-liberalism, in which young people's displays of 'extreme drinking' have been the

focus of intense and sustained concern in governmental discourses (Martinic and Measham, 2008).

What is the significance of this culture of 'determined drunkenness' in the neo-liberal social order? Hayward and Hobbs (2007) view such practices as not simply allowed but mandated by the corporate economics of neo-liberalism. The force of this argument is undeniable given the restructuring of the night-time economy, the drinks industry and the alcohol retail trade around young people's intensified alcohol consumption. The increase in the strength and volume of alcohol consumed by drinkers of all ages and the ubiquitous marketing of cheap deals to young drinkers have played an important role in shaping the culture of intoxication (Room, 2005). One could also argue, however, that young people's 'extreme drinking' appears to unsettle some of the basic tenets of neo-liberalism, with its goal of immoderation, abnegation of responsibility and self-control, and voluntary engagement in unpleasant and excessive risky practices. These young people's 'passing out stories' also appear to trouble the neo-liberal project with their apparent refusal to inhabit the position of responsible, moderate and rational subjectivity.

So what is the allure of drinking to (extreme) intoxication on a fairly regular basis (between twice a week and once a month for our participants, when funds allowed), for young women and men? Part of the allure lay in the integral relationship between excessive drinking and 'fun' as central to the cohesiveness, intimacy and care provided by young people's social friendship groups. In addition, a key position offered by/to the unconscious drunken subjects in these 'passing out stories' is one of escape: a sort of 'time out' from the world of rational civilized individual subjectivity and self-control. These narratives offer a form of surrender to the forces of chaos and hedonism, with all the associated possibilities of physical, sexual and psychological harm that entails. The unconscious (or semi-conscious) protagonists in such narratives could be viewed as the counterpoint to the rational and responsible subjects in governmental discourses on 'sensible' alcohol consumption. Indeed young people's public displays of 'extreme

drinking' help to constitute the equally excessive (but altogether more private) alcohol consumption of the middle-aged middle classes as civilized and moderate.

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### End notes

1. The four co-authors are joint second authors to reflect their equal contribution to the development of this paper.
2. See Martinic and Measham (2008) for a detailed exploration of different definitions of 'binge drinking'.

3. This project on 'Branded consumption and social identification: Young people and alcohol' was funded by the ESRC (ref: RES-148-25-0021) as part of the programme on Identities and Social Action. In addition to the authors of this paper, David Clarke and Louise Weale were involved in some of the data collection and analysis.
4. David Clarke was the researcher in extract 6, and Andrew Bengry-Howell was the researcher in all other quoted extracts from focus group discussions.
5. All the names of individuals and locations mentioned in this paper have been changed. Transcription conventions adapted from Potter and Wetherell (1987).
  - = Indicates the absence of a discernable gap between speakers
  - (.) A pause of less than 1 second
  - (1), (2) A pause of 1 second, 2 seconds and so on
  - (...) Some transcript has been deliberately omitted
  - [ABH laughs] Material in square brackets is clarifying information
  - They A word or phrase underlined indicates additional emphasis
  - [as you can Left square brackets indicates overlapping speech
6. Freshers week is a series of events at British universities for new first year undergraduate students, which are increasingly likely to be organised around intensive periods of excessive alcohol consumption, often with the involvement of local bars and pubs.
7. Sambuca is an Italian aniseed-flavoured liqueur which is usually brewed to 84 proof and can be served neat in a shot glass and set alight in order to increase the flavour.