

Alcohol consumption and young people: exploring meaning and social context

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Abstract

In this paper we report on the alcohol consumption patterns of 106 teenagers (15 year olds) living on the East coast of Scotland. We examine the social context of respondents' drinking behaviours and the meanings which they attached to their actions. Our sample consumed alcohol in multiple social contexts including on street corners, in local parks, pubs and clubs, and in friends' and their own homes. Respondents discussed four main reasons for drinking alcohol—peer influence/pressure, social facilitation, mood alteration, and to cope with personal difficulties and/or to relieve stress. We argue that as alcohol is widely used and accepted within adult society it is one of the tasks of adolescence to learn to use it appropriately. For the majority of teenagers this is a relatively unproblematic process, although it sometimes involves mistakes and episodes of drunkenness; for others, alcohol appears to have become a 'drug of solace'. In conclusion, we argue that for health promotion to be effective it must take account of both *where* and *why* young people drink, and support those who are experiencing or are likely to have difficulties.

Introduction

Concerns expressed by policy makers about teenage drinking differ from those that surround other

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teenage health behaviours such as smoking, physical exercise, dietary habits and safer sex practices. Excessive alcohol consumption is seen to entail more than biomedical issues for the user and overt social consequences are noted, e.g. vandalism, violence, traffic offences, and increased absenteeism from schools, colleges and work (Collins, 1981; Home Office, 1987; Royal College of Physicians, 1995). For May (1992), alcohol consumption has become increasingly defined not only as a problem *for* young people but also as a problem *of* young people.

Gathering accurate information on teenage drinking is fraught with methodological difficulties; particularly with regard to those in their early or mid teens who are not legally entitled to buy alcohol. The very nature of much early and mid teenage drinking means that respondents may often not know how many units of alcohol they have consumed; either because they lack knowledge concerning the various strengths of drinks or because cans and bottles are passed around in a somewhat haphazard way in parks, on street corners or in friends' houses. It is also challenging to disentangle adolescent bravado or shyness surrounding alcohol use from actual consumption (Marsh *et al.*, 1986; Sharp and Lowe, 1989; May, 1992).

Careful quantitative studies, however, provide some insight into levels of teenage drinking and there is some consistency of findings (Plant and Plant 1992). OPCS found that, for Scottish 15 year olds, 35% of males and 28% of females reported having drunk alcohol in the week prior to the survey (Thomas *et al.*, 1993). Plant and Plant (1992) in another large-scale Scottish study of 15-

empirical work, Beck *et al.* (1993) argue that for North American teenagers it is possible to identify five distinct *social contexts of drinking*: social facilitation, school defiance, stress control, peer acceptance and under parental control.

In looking at the relationships between these *social contexts of drinking*, the volume of alcohol consumed and the social consequences of drinking, Thoms and Beck (1994) report that those most likely to experience significant problems as a result of alcohol are those who drink in the context of *stress control* and/or *school defiance*. Fortunately, however, these social contexts are noted as being relatively uncommon with the majority of teenage drinking taking place in relation to *social facilitation*.

In this paper we report on the drinking behaviours of 106 teenagers (15 year olds) living on the East coast of Scotland. Specifically, we examine the social context of their drinking and provide insight into the meanings which respondents attached to their actions. In doing this, we draw on the theoretical work of Beck *et al.* Our *social context* categories are, however, derived from our own data and therefore differ in important respects from those developed by Beck *et al.* in North America. In conclusion we look at the implications of our findings for future health promotion strategies.

Method

The study sample and recruitment procedures

Our study sample was recruited via two state comprehensive schools on the East coast of Scotland. The schools were selected on the basis that they were co-educational, had achieved average examination results in the academic year preceding the study, had a catchment area that covered a broad range of socio-economic groupings, and included both rural and urban areas. All Secondary four¹ (S4) pupils and their parent and/or guardian were approached and consent sought from both parties ($n = 307$). This meant that our study

was an 'opt-in' rather than an 'opt-out' project, involving double consent. Although this approach has much to recommend it ethically, it also means that recruitment can be problematic. Of the 307 pupils and parents/guardians whom we approached, 110 gave the requisite double consent, 53 replied but declined consent and 144 failed to reply; one follow-up letter was sent. Four of the 110 pupils who agreed to take part in the study were excluded from the main study in order to use them for testing the instruments during pilot interviews. This left a total sample size of 106 young people (female 49; male 57); a response rate of 34.5% of all S4 pupils in both schools. For our purposes this sample size was adequate. It was large enough to cover a range of drinking behaviours and to permit some statistical analysis, while remaining small enough to undertake qualitative data collection and analysis.

Below we examine further our sample's characteristics and consider possible bias. In the summer following our interviews 27.4% of our sample left school. This was broadly in line with the summer school leaving rate for the total S4 populations for the two participating schools (24.1%). Table I presents a comparison of the academic achievement of our sample with the total number of pupils (S4 and S5), from the two schools, who sat Standard grades in the summer of 1995. Figures referring solely to the total number of S4 pupils who sat Standard grades in 1995 were not available, and while it appears that our sample was slightly skewed towards higher academic achievers, our sample also contained pupils from a wide range of academic abilities.

Table II presents information on the day-time occupations of our sample 6 months after the initial interview period (November 1995). As is apparent, the majority of our sample stayed on at school (after S4). However, the study cohort also covered the full range of post 16 destinations.

The study design

The research design involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. A structured questionnaire was used to gather baseline data, including the

Table III. *The last time that respondents drank alcohol: percentages (n = 106)*

	Males	Females	Overall
Never drunk alcohol	5.3 (3)	8.2 (4)	6.6 (7)
1-7 days ago	35.1 (20)	26.5 (13)	31.1 (33)
7 days to 1 month ago	45.6 (26)	53.1 (26)	49.1 (52)
More than 1 month	14.0 (8)	10.2 (5)	12.3 (13)
None responses (missing values)		2.0 (1)	0.9 (1)

Number of respondents in parentheses.

Results

The drinking patterns of the sample

In our questionnaire we asked respondents to tell us when they last drank alcohol. Four time categories were offered and the young people were asked to choose the one that best described them (Table III).

The regular drinking rate for our sample was broadly in line with previous OPCS figures for Scottish 15 year olds; wherein 35% of males and 28% of females reported having drunk alcohol in the week prior to the survey (Thomas *et al.*, 1993). During the qualitative interview, we asked respondents to tell us more about their usual drinking patterns. These qualitative questions revealed that 33.3% of male and 30.6% of female respondents drank alcohol at least once a week.

Access to alcohol was not a problem for the majority of respondents, who reported buying alcohol from a number of different sources: shops and garages; pubs and clubs. It was common knowledge which local shops, clubs and pubs would serve them. Respondents who either lacked the confidence to buy alcohol or who looked too young to get away with it told us that they got older friends or siblings to buy it for them. Our questionnaire data showed a relationship between the respondents' income levels and their drinking behaviours. Twenty-five percent ($n = 15$) of those with a weekly income of £10 or less drank regularly (at least weekly) compared to 42.2% ($n = 19$) of those receiving or earning more than £10 per

week. This relationship did not vary significantly by gender.

Where did the young people drink?

Previous literature has suggested that adolescence is a time when many young people move from having an occasional drink at home (with meals or at family parties) to drinking more frequently in pubs, clubs and discos (May, 1992). We found examples of young people who drank solely at home and others who had made a shift to drinking more regularly in pubs and clubs. However, these two groups and these settings were by no means the most common sites for alcohol consumption. The vast majority of reported drinking took place either on the street (in local parks or on nearby beaches), or at friends' houses when parents/guardians were out or away. For the majority of respondents drinking was also something that only took place at the weekends and then primarily on a Saturday evening:

- Respondent *Just everybody sits an' drinks in the field. The yin across there. The one wi' the footba an all that.*
- Interviewer *Oh, right, I see, do people see you, does no-one....?*
- Respondent *Naebody bothers. Some folk phone the polis but they never do nothing about it. Just tell you to keep the noise down.*
- Interviewer *Do they? They don't move you on or anything like that?*
- Respondent *Naw. Cos they know if you go down the hill (into town)... As long as you're no' chucking bottles or that a' over the field. Just tell you to put your stuff in the bucket an' try an' not to be so noisy. (m026)*
- Interviewer *So, would you just drink in pubs or do you drink...*
- Respondent *Well we drink in the house then we go oot tae the pub, we dinnae really drink in the pub. So, we just sit there... (f051)*

The findings from our questionnaire also high-

Table IV. The relationship between respondents, perceiving their friends to drink regularly and drinking themselves: percentages (n = 104)

	Doesn't drink regularly	Drinks regularly
Less one-third of friends drink weekly	87.5 (n = 42)	12.5 (n = 6)
More than one-third of friends drink weekly	53.6 (n = 30)	46.4 (n = 26)

P = 0.00042.

Interviewer *Can you identify any particular reason why you do it (drink)?*

Respondent *Just to be one o' the gang, you know. I wouldnae go an' do it masel' like, if I was just mysel' but just because they do (giggles). Just to be one o' them you know. Mix wi' them. (f072)*

Respondent *A couple of weeks ago actually I said I wasnae drinking any more, started giving it up an' everybody started laughing and slagging me about it I couldnae believe it.... well I lasted about a week. ... I was going to save up to buy a couple o' computer games an' that.*

Interviewer *Yeah, was it quite hard to stop?*

Respondent *Oh aye. Everybody else was away oot drinking an' I'm sitting in the hoose watching Blind Date an' that wi my ma and pa. It's kinda bad pater. (m026)*

Our questionnaire results also showed a relationship between respondents having friends who drink regularly and consuming alcohol themselves (Table IV). The relationship held for both males and females but was slightly stronger for males.

Social facilitation

The most often cited reason for consuming alcohol was that respondents felt that drinking enhanced their social experience: the young people reported

that they had a better time and enjoyed themselves more when their social group drank alcohol, wherever they were. There was an interesting gender division in that the young women (but not young men) said that alcohol gave them more confidence:

Respondent *One or two occasions I've been drunk but most of the time, it's getting merry, just to build my confidence just to speak to people. (f037)*

Interviewer *What is it about drinking that you like?*

Respondent *Em, I suppose just em, it improves the crowd that you're wi'. Ken, I mean, if you're with some people it makes you less hostile but I dinnae really drink so I get totally drunk an' totally stupid aboot the place.*

Interviewer *When you say less hostile what do you mean, can you explain that more or...*

Respondent *Well, it makes a better atmosphere when you're wi' an awful lot mair people, ken what I mean, you're more at ease wi them. (m003)*

Mood alteration

Another explanation of drinking given by respondents was the belief that alcohol positively influenced their mood. Respondents talked of using alcohol to 'give them a hit' or to make them 'feel happy'. These explanations differed from the *social facilitation* and *peer influence* categories in that respondents located the desired effects of alcohol at a level of personal feelings rather than at a social group level. The *mood alteration* explanations also differed from the *coping and stress reduction* category, in that the respondents' behaviours were not always a response to an identifiable stressor or source of worry:

Interviewer *When you say it makes you enjoy yourself, what, in what ways?*

the next day... I mean everybody else seemed to be doing it at the time. They were getting guid laughs and it seemed harmless at the time. Just the next morning, I mean you feel terrible, I mean you can't remember what you bin daeing, and some o' the things you dae could be shockin', a few of my pals had got aggressive. Aye they ended up fighting... (m023)

really yin fir drinking but... I suppose I just do it to be sociable ... and it costs a lot of money as well. (1fr036)

Discussion and conclusion

However, certain factors did seem to be associated with respondents getting drunk. First, for those drinking either on the streets or at house-parties there was the issue of what was available. On occasion this led to various kinds of drink of differing strengths being consumed in one session. Second, inexperience with drink often meant that respondents were not aware of the ways that it takes effect. There was also evidence of the young people not knowing or only just beginning to learn about the ways that their own particular metabolisms interacted with alcohol. Third, there were examples of bravado and a simple showing-off leading to respondents consuming far more alcohol than they originally intended; this process was often further extenuated and exaggerated by the disinhibiting effects of alcohol.

Although we did not find a simple association between particular social settings and the volume of alcohol consumed, we did find evidence that the perceived importance of the negative aspects of drinking (particularly the physical effects) were tied to respondents' explanations for consuming alcohol. Although there was a degree of overlap between the 'reasons for drinking' categories, those who drank *primarily* under peer influence/pressure were more likely to talk in negative ways about alcohol than those who drank *primarily* to alter their mood or to relieve stress:

Respondent who drank primarily because of peer influence

Respondent *Oh, you wake up with a stinking sair heid, aye (laughs). I'm no'*

Much of the research which has informed health promotion around young people has drawn heavily on psychological perspectives, notably the health belief model and social learning theory (Nutbeam *et al.*, 1989). While this has provided useful insights for health promotion practice, it has been argued by Bunton and his colleagues (1991) that these models of behavioural change tend to use a limited notion of the social, in particular neglecting the role of social structure and culture. In this study we have attempted to explore both the social contexts of young people's drinking and the meanings that their actions had for them.

Our findings show that many of our sample drank alcohol on a regular basis; however, they did so in different social settings and for various reasons. We found that respondents drank at home with the family, in the street (including in parks, outside local shops and at beach parties), in each other's houses, and at pubs, clubs and discos. They also drank because of peer influence/pressure, for social facilitation, mood alteration, and to cope with personal problems and/or to relieve stress.

Our work suggests that an adequate understanding of young people's drinking behaviours requires that their behaviours be carefully located and embedded within specific social contexts and their wider lives. We found some evidence of a relationship between the importance that respondents placed upon the negative affects of alcohol (particularly physical) and their primary motivation for drinking. Thus our findings indicate a need for sophisticated and diverse health promotion strategies, as both the health promotion needs of adolescents and the likely effectiveness of any intervention are integrally tied to the key factors of *where* and *why* the young people consume alcohol.

We found that for our sample the single most

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