Making Sense of Consuming Less in a Culture of Excessive Alcohol Consumption: An Exploratory Study of the Neutralisation and Affirmation Techniques Used by British Students

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Abstract

This paper contributes to understanding how students cope with potential feelings of tension and ambivalence regarding their alcohol consumption. In-depth interviews with both consumers and non-consumers of alcohol helped identify the types of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and affirmation (Copes and Williams, 2007) techniques used in their narratives. Drinkers primarily employed neutralisation techniques as a means of rationalising the negative impact of their actions whereas abstainers mainly used techniques of affirmation as a way of reinforcing their commitment to lifestyles which were against mainstream student life expectations. However, both drinkers and non-drinkers employed neutralising and affirmative techniques in some instances. The paper discusses the implications of these findings for public policy and social marketing campaigns in favour of less drinking.

Keywords: techniques of neutralisation, techniques of affirmation, alcohol consumption,

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Introduction

There is much concern in the UK about the excessive alcohol consumption of the adult population, and young people in particular (Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs, 2009). However, alcohol plays a major social facilitative role in many young people's lives, and any attempt to re-position 'not drinking' as a socially acceptable practice (e.g. HM Government, 2007) provides a major public policy challenge. The central role that "binge drinking" (e.g. Berridge et al. 2007, 2009)   still occupies in many young people's social lives is highlighted in recent research (Griffin et al. 2009; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009), but there is also evidence that some young people face tensions and ambivalence in their approach to alcohol consumption (Banister and Piacentini, 2006; de Visser and Smith, 2007). Understanding both the positive and negative associations with alcohol consumption is an important aspect of developing and influencing health promotion strategies to moderate drinking, and this article contributes to this understanding. We report the results of two studies, the first involving young people who identify themselves as heavy drinkers and the second focussing on young people who are non-consumers of alcohol. We draw on Neutralisation Theory (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and Affirmation Theory (Copes and Williams, 2007) to explore the complexity of the ways in which young people make sense of their alcohol consumption.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

There is ample evidence that most young people face considerable tension and ambivalence regarding their approach to drinking (e.g. de Visser and Smith, 2007; Piacentini and Bannister, 2008). Neutralisation theory (Sykes and Matza, 1957) suggests that in the face of potential internal tensions, a key way in which people maintain particular narratives of the self and a sense of cohesion is through employing typical justifications that are learned in the course of social interaction. Sykes and Matza (1957) originally identified five techniques: "denial of responsibility" (claiming one's behaviour is accidental or beyond his/her control), "denial of injury" (claiming the extent of injury or harm involved is minimal), "denial of victim" (claiming that the victims are unknown and too abstract or that the victims deserved whatever happened), "condemning the condemners" (shifting the focus of attention to the behaviour of those expressing disapproval) and "appealing to higher loyalties" (claiming that whatever happened was an attempt to meet a higher ordered value or ideal). Since its original formulation, the theory has been one of the most widely known and frequently cited in the sociology of deviance and beyond (for reviews see Fritsche, 2005; Maruna and Copes, 2005). Although neutralisation theory has been applied as a way of explaining excessive drinking, research in this domain is generally limited. For example, acceptance of neutralisation techniques is typically added as an additional predictor in quantitative studies that treat excessive drinking as an example of non-normative behaviour (e.g. Durkin et al. 2005; Mitchell and Dodder, 1983). This seems to ignore the reality in many Western countries, whereby University norms are in favour of excessive (rather than limited or no) drinking (e.g. McCreanor et al. 2008). Accordingly, Maruna and Copes (2005) argue that counting how many times neutralisation techniques are cited by participants or their degree of acceptance is inadequate, and that a more promising avenue is to treat them as a key dimension of peoples' broader narratives of self and social situations.

On the other hand, students who decide to abstain from alcohol consumption face the challenge of maintaining a positive student identity that is against prevailing norms of what a "typical student" life entails (Colby et al. 2009) and this can also provide a source of tension and ambivalence (Piacentini and Banister, 2006). Copes and Williams (2007) have advanced the concept of "techniques of affirmation" to account for how "Straightedgers" reinforce their commitment to lifestyles that go against the mainstream youth culture. These techniques represent logical counter-arguments to "techniques of neutralisation", and are: acknowledgment of responsibility, acknowledgment of injury, acknowledgment of the victim, discounting condemners and reference to priority relationships. Similar arguments could be used by non-drinking students when, for instance, acknowledging the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption, the importance of religious or personal moral norms and so on. However, unlike Straightedgers who attempt to construct identities that are seen as clearly separate and superior to mainstream youth (Copes and Williams, 2007), many non-drinking students may face the additional challenge of balancing a 'non-drinking' identification alongside a 'student' identification. The techniques used by both drinkers and abstainers to resolve their identify conflicts around alcohol is the central focus of this paper. We aim to illustrate the range of neutralisation and affirmation techniques drawn on by both groups; and explore the complex interplay between neutralisation and affirmation techniques.

Method

Both studies took place in a campus university in the North West of England. *Study one* focused on alcohol consumption, comprising of five focus group discussions (each with five-seven participants) to capture the social interactions around alcohol consumption. To ensure thorough engagement with, and access to, the student world, student researchers were trained to lead focus groups about alcohol consumption and students' social lives. Five undergraduate second year student researchers were recruited on the basis of their competence on a marketing research module. The discussions lasted between one and one and a half hours, and all were digitally recorded and transcribed. In total there were 27 participants in this stage of the research. *Study two* focused on people who did not drink alcohol. Data collection was via one-to-one in-depth interviews in order to target students who socialise with drinkers but who would may not talk as comfortably in focus group situations. Participants were recruited through advertisements posted around campus and placed on course Websites, and the eligibility criterion was 'not drinking alcohol'. However, participants interpreted 'not drinking alcohol' in comparative terms within the student culture, and some were in fact 'relatively light drinkers'. Nine participants took part in this study, comprising four males and five females. Each interview lasted between 45 and 89 min.

All authors undertook the analysis, first separately and independently, followed by a phase of sharing to explore alternative explanations. Transcript analysis consisted of reading and re-reading, noting patterns and themes in a search for "patterns and recurring organisations" (Wetherall et al. 1988, p.177), accompanied by a process of categorisation, abstraction, comparison and integration (Spiggle, 1994).

<center>**Findings**</center>

Techniques of Neutralisation Used by Drinkers

Within the transcripts there was ample evidence to suggest that students readily employ a variety of neutralisation techniques to account for, and normalise excessive drinking (e.g. Berridge et al. 2007). However, in line with previous research (e.g. Grove et al. 1989) not all five neutralisation techniques were equally represented. The most popular techniques were denial of injury, appeal to higher loyalties and denial of responsibility. Some additional techniques were also identified and these resembled arguments that have been labelled in later applications of neutralisation theory as "scapegoating" (Peretti-Watel, 2003) or "justification by comparison" (Thurman, 1984), and "justification by postponement" (Cromwell and Thurman, 2003; Thurman, 1984). Typical examples of such techniques are listed below:

Denial of Injury:	*"I don't change that much when I drink"*
	"We are young and healthy and our livers work well"
Appeals to Higher Loyalties:	*"...Well I wouldn't have met my girlfriend now, if I hadn't been drunk, it gave me confidence to go and talk to her"*
	"Alcohol is important to me as it gives me the chance... to do things that you wouldn't usually do and it's something to look forward to like it gets you through the week and you can forget about everything else."
Denials of Responsibility:	*".....I'd have a few drinks but I wouldn't go mad or anything and then the girls on hockey tour would make us drink unbelievable amounts."*
	"Yeah but then drinks are quite cheap, that's another thing in some places you can get really cheap drinks. It's sometimes cheaper to drink alcohol than it is to drink diet coke ..."
Justifications by comparison/"scapegoating":	*"Different groups of people, they are different aren't they? Like people in this house drink reasonable amounts. But other people like the rugby team are just a joke..."*
Justifications by postponement:	*"Third year - it'll not change that much, maybe a little bit. Still going to go out nights when we've not got work to do or whatever. Whereas probably when we graduate and get a job we won't be able to go out say on a Wednesday night because of work."*

Techniques of Affirmation Used by Abstainers

Instead of neutralisations, light drinkers and abstainers expressed affirmations as a way to strengthen their commitment to, and self-identification with lifestyles which, in a university context, were deemed to be against the mainstream. Consistent with Copes and William's findings (2007), some of these affirmations opposed typical neutralising arguments (i.e. acknowledgment of responsibility, acknowledgment of injury, reference to priority relationships and values) while others seemed to complement traditional neutralisations (i.e. discounting the condemners and resisting negative labelling):

Acknowledgment of Responsibility:	*"I'm a bit of a control freak as well, so I don't ever want to be the person that's on the floor and everyone's laughing at*

	them."
Acknowledgment of injury:	*"I've been there … well both times when it's happened. One girl it's happened to twice, which resulted in hospital and then the other time with her, I've actually had to take her home and put her in her bed and she couldn't remember anything..."*
Reference to priority relationships and values:	*"In a way I've got a lot more free time and I'm not really too bothered about missing a night out if I can help it, as long as it's not something I definitely need to go to..I guess I've sort of got a clearer mind as well…"`*
Discounting Condemners and Resisting Negative Labeling:	*"It was more like you could laugh at other people making a fool of themselves and thinking 'why are they really doing that' because you like kind of see like the sober element …"*

The Interplay of Neutralisation and Affirmation Techniques

Techniques of affirmation used by drinkers

Consistent with previous research (deVisser and Smith, 2007), drinkers were aware of the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and descriptions of the downsides of drinking were common during the focus group discussions. Nonetheless, in most instances, these were spontaneously counter-argued, and the students' commitment to drinking lifestyles was reinforced by employing further neutralisation-type arguments:

> Ryan: It's a part of uni but I think if everyone didn't drink then yeah grades overall would go up, slightly. (Acknowledgment of Injury)
> Harry: To be honest, if I wasn't drinking I wouldn't do more work instead, I'd find something else to do. (Denial of Injury)

Although affirmation techniques were employed (particularly acknowledgement of injury), these were countered by further neutralisation techniques. From a cognitive dissonance perspective (Festinger, 1957), such dialogues resembled the process of adding consonant beliefs so that dissonance is reduced and drinking behaviour continues. Nonetheless, not all participants had fully internalised neutralisation-type of arguments:

> Phoebe: But erm, it's still erm I still like to go out and get drunk!
> Rachel: I actually did change the way I was after that, I didn't want to get like that ever again, it was just an awful experience, like when I was on holiday I was more cautious.

Both Phoebe and Rachel had some negative drinking experiences that made them think of potential counter-arguments (or techniques of affirmation) to neutralising beliefs, yet for Phoebe, these were not sufficiently internalised to effectively challenge behaviour. On the contrary, Rachel claimed that her attitudes and behaviour towards drinking did change.

Techniques of neutralisation used by abstainers

For some abstainers, their decision not to drink seemed to be based on a rational evaluation of alcohol's downsides or strong religious and moral reasons with no identity conflicts involved (Ahuvia, 2005). Yet, for other participants the decision to abstain from alcohol consumption was not as straightforward. Some had previous or sporadic experiences of excessive drinking

which were contrary to their current lifestyle choices and identity projects. In these occasions, similar to drinkers, they employed a variety of neutralisation techniques:

> Mike: I was very much friends with people that drank a lot (Appeal to Higher Loyalties). And erm, I drank alone quite a lot as well, so I guess it couldn't just be that. (Acknowledgment of Responsibility)

Many abstainers however, were aware of the benefits of alcohol consumption, such as helping to establish and maintain relationships in a university context, and some of them admitted further benefits such as increased confidence and self-gratification. In turn, acknowledging the loss of such benefits often highlighted potential internal tensions:

> Ben: But you still kind of question it sometimes and think you know, maybe I should have just embraced it as well as everyone else…

Conclusion

The findings from this research carry important implications for public policy interventions and social marketing campaigns that aim at a position where "it is socially acceptable for young people to choose not to drink" (HM Government, 2007: 62). Attempts to limit alcohol consumption should not only problematise the thinking that drinking is part of "typical student" identities and lifestyles (Piacentini and Banister, 2006), but also appreciate and effectively challenge the neutralisations that help maintain current (excessive) drinking levels. For instance, overemphasis on benefits such as socialisation, excitement and pleasure derived from drinking represented a neutralisation technique that was used pervasively amongst drinkers and this is also a prominent theme in alcohol advertising (e.g. Szmigin et al. 2008). If responsible drinking campaigns are to effectively counter the antagonistic effects of such alcohol adverts (Hackley et al. 2008) neutralisations need to be made explicit, deconstructed and ultimately resisted.

In a significant departure from previous studies on students' alcohol consumption, this focused on both consumers and non-consumers of alcohol. Whereas drinking students experienced feelings of stress and dissonance when considering the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption, non-drinking students experienced similar feelings in their attempt to maintain positive student identities that are against prevailing norms of what a "typical student" life entails. From a public policy and social marketing perspective, the current findings suggest that there is a pertinent need for anti- neutralisation based campaigns, not only due to their potential to act as dissonance-inducing strategies for drinking students but also as a means of reinforcing consonance and confidence to those students that have already taken the decision to not drink or drink less.

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