

Teenage drinking cultures

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This report investigates the onset and development of drinking behaviours within teenage friendship groups.

Using social network data from the Belfast Youth Development Study, the study identified and sampled eight relatively stable friendship groups covering a mix of social class, gender and type of education. By interviewing multiple members from each group, the study was able to construct a picture of the groups' drinking culture and how it developed as the friends grew older. The 41 young people who participated were aged 18 or 19 when interviewed, and were asked about their teenage drinking behaviours between the ages of 12 and 18. The report:

- discusses the development of drinking etiquette (a set of tacit informal rules and regulations surrounding a group's drinking behaviour);
- investigates how teenagers manage their intoxication within the group;
- considers the importance of relationships both within the friendship group and outside it (e.g. parents);
- presents findings about underage experiences of alcohol-related harm;
- makes conclusions and discusses the implications of findings, including restricting access to alcohol, teaching harm reduction skills and the role of parents.

It is with great sadness and regret that we have to announce that **Dr Patrick McCrystal** passed away suddenly during the final stages of this research project. He was a close friend and valued colleague, and is greatly missed. The loss of his knowledge, commitment and contribution to this study and to the wider field of adolescent drug research is considerable. Our thoughts are with his family.

Shall we begin by enacting that boys shall not taste wine at all until they are eighteen years of age; we will tell them that fire must not be poured upon fire, whether in the body or in the soul, until they begin to go to work—this is a precaution which has to be taken against the excitableness of youth;—afterwards they may taste wine in moderation up to the age of thirty, but while a man is young he should abstain altogether from intoxication and from excess of wine.

(Plato, c. 360 BC)¹

Teenagers – lost somewhere between school and the pub.

(Mickey Flanagan, 2009)

¹ This quotation is taken from *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Laws*, by Plato (Book 2), translated by Benjamin Jowett. Available from Project Gutenberg (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1750/1750-h/1750-h.htm#2H_4_0005).

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Executive summary

Background

Underage drinking is a social activity usually undertaken by small groups of close friends, well away from the oversight of parents or other significant adults. Over time, these groups of teenage drinkers develop a range of social habits, rules and rituals that facilitate their shared alcohol consumption. Taken together, this shared system of knowledge, behaviours and customs forms the group's alcohol *idioculture* (see Fine, 1979, for a more detailed definition of idioculture). This idioculture emerges through the interaction of group members and provides a basis for future group interactions when consuming alcohol.

The aim of this study was to improve our understanding of the small-group drinking cultures that emerge amongst underage drinkers and how these vary both within groups (over time) and between groups. Aspects of idioculture examined include the shared norms, goals and standards used by groups to determine acceptable drinking behaviour, the strategies and techniques used by groups to manage their consumption whilst avoiding detection by parents or other adults and the social interactions within and between groups that influence their drinking behaviour.

Methodology

This study utilised social network data collected during an on-going longitudinal study of teenage alcohol and drug use, the Belfast Youth Development Study (BYDS). The BYDS has tracked a single cohort of young people since 2000, when they first entered post-primary education. The cohort members are now all aged around 21. In addition to providing details of their alcohol and drug use, the cohort members were asked to list their best friend and up to nine other friends within their school year group. This social network data was used to identify relatively stable friendship groups within participating schools. Groups were selected to provide a mix of social class, gender (including single- and mixed-gender groups) and type of education (secondary or grammar).

Group members were then invited for interview. Thirty-six interviews were completed across eight friendship groups. In an additional five groups, only one group member agreed to be interviewed, giving a total of 41 interviews. The young people were aged 18 or 19 at the time of interview. They were asked about their drinking behaviours during their teenage years, from onset until age 18. The interviews focused on their initial engagement with alcohol, the development of more regular drinking behaviour, instances of alcohol-related problems or negative experiences and the transition to more adult drinking patterns. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. A modified grounded theory approach was used to code and analyse the data. Analysis was undertaken at an individual and a group level, with individual analysis used to construct a representation of the group idioculture that emerged around the friends' use of alcohol.

Drinking etiquette

Curiosity and social conformity appeared to be the main drivers of young people's initial engagement with alcohol. Usually one member of the friendship group was introduced to alcohol by older acquaintances

or relatives and then quickly passed on this newly acquired knowledge to his or her friendship group. However, the purpose of drinking alcohol quickly matured amongst the young drinkers. The illicit consumption of alcohol was exciting, thrilling and a source of considerable pleasure to the underage drinkers. Alcohol helped to facilitate social interactions within the groups, making an evening together much more fun. Alcohol was also used to boost confidence, to reduce inhibitions, to facilitate having a laugh with friends and to reduce stress.

Much teenage drinking is age specific. Younger drinkers tend to consume alcohol on the street, to go to considerable lengths to conceal their consumption from adults and to drink flavoured premixed spirit beverages. As they grow older, they progress to more adult drinks, and prefer to consume alcohol indoors or in more comfortable surroundings. This culminates in gaining access to licensed venues, typically youth-orientated clubs or bars, and usually before the legal age requirement.

Different alcoholic drinks are invested with considerable symbolic meaning. Some drinks are considered to be more masculine drinks and some more feminine. Likewise, the volume of the container, representing the volume consumed (quarter-bottle or half-bottle, for example), is widely regarded as a measure of drinking expertise and status. As teenagers mature, there is an expectation amongst friends that their drinking patterns will also change, for example a switch from cider (considered a starter drink) to beer (considered an adult drink).

The groups in our study appeared to differ in their overall drinking goals. For some, the emphasis was on achieving a high level of alcohol intoxication. Here, the volume of alcohol consumed by male group members was a measure of status within the group, and was also used by group members to judge the status of other drinkers. For other groups, the goal of alcohol consumption was more social. Among these groups, the overall level of intoxication within the group tended to be lower. The drinking goals adopted by groups also varied according to the social context of the drinking session. External constraints, such as the time young people have to be home or weather conditions, would often result in an adjustment to normal drinking patterns.

Drinking on the street was generally undertaken out of necessity. However, as the young drinkers grew older, other locations became available to them. Parents began to permit modest consumption within the home, and those young people who looked older began to gain access to licensed bars and clubs. Once the initial thrill of street drinking wore off, young people were only too keen to start drinking indoors.

Managing intoxication

Teenage drinking observed in this study was almost exclusively focused on getting drunk. Only one of the groups observed displayed very low levels of alcohol consumption not associated with intoxication. Once young people managed to access alcohol they quickly progressed to drinking to get drunk. However, the groups clearly distinguished between getting drunk and losing control. Young drinkers did not like to feel or be sick, to be unable to walk or to pass out when drinking. Teenage drinkers recognised, appreciated and endeavoured to develop expertise in their drinking. Here, expertise is defined as the ability to consume high levels of alcohol whilst not getting too drunk or losing control. When starting out, young drinkers lacked any real experience of consuming alcohol. They looked towards more knowledgeable acquaintances to provide advice and information on accessing and drinking alcohol. However, the groups quickly acquired drinking knowledge, through word of mouth and by individual trial and error. This growth in skill and expertise allowed them to develop and refine a drinking culture that suited the group. Following on from this, individuals were judged on their drinking expertise, both within and across drinking groups. Through this social comparison teenagers monitored their own drinking abilities, as they progressed from novice to expert drinking. In one group, comparisons of drinking ability developed a competitive edge, and played an important role in determining social status within the group.

Each group's drinking culture recognised that there was an appropriate level of intoxication when out drinking, although the specific level varied between groups. Teenagers would strive to get sufficiently drunk (achieve their desired level of intoxication), without losing control or getting into trouble. Competing social priorities and constraints, such as playing sports, academic study or religion, were associated with lower levels of acceptable drunkenness, as these groups attempted to balance their desire for intoxication with their longer term goals and aspirations. There was a degree of social stigma associated with losing control as a result of consuming alcohol, particularly amongst young female drinkers. Being sick or passing out was not seen as a desirable outcome of drinking.

The groups described a range of strategies used to ensure that the appropriate level of intoxication was achieved by their members, usually developed on a simple trial and error basis. These included:

- purchasing the 'right amount' of alcohol at the start of the evening, i.e. the amount that is known to produce a certain level of intoxication;
- monitoring levels of intoxication among group members (a benchmark) who are known get drunk at the same rate;
- eating food or drinking water in an attempt to sober up (or slow rate of intoxication);
- eating food in an attempt to disguise the level of intoxication (while waiting to sober up);
- pretending to be drunker than is actually the case (thus avoiding the need to be seen to drink more);
- playing drinking games (to speed up the pace of drinking within the group);
- verbal encouragement among group members to drink up (or in some cases to slow down).

Generally, most young people were relatively competent in avoiding incidents of loss of control, although all reported making mistakes. However, they appeared to be particularly vulnerable to overshooting their desired level of intoxication when elements of their local drinking environment changed, such as drinking in a new location or with new people or drinking new brands.

Relationships

Alcohol consumption is a social activity. It stands to reason, therefore, that the young people's drinking behaviour was influenced by the behaviour of others within their social world. However, the social processes underlying this influence cannot be reduced to simple ideas of peer pressure. Drinking culture evolved and developed over time and was shaped by the numerous social interactions between friends, as well as the group's relationship with the broader social environment.

Important aspects of this group interaction include the level of commitment the group expects from its constituent members (the degree to which they toe the party drinking line), the individual roles that members play within the group (and the associated status and influence accorded to them) and the impact that individuals external to the group can have on individual group members (including parents, siblings and boy/girlfriends). These social interactions help explain the processes through which peer group drinking cultures are established and shaped by young people.

Alcohol played an important role in the social world of our teenagers. To an extent, a decision not to engage in this normative activity could lead to exclusion from the broader youth scene. This happened to one of the groups involved in this study. Their lack of drinking created a social barrier between them

and most of their peer groups. Group members acknowledged feeling isolated and on the periphery of the rigid social structure within their school.

Amongst younger teenagers dating was a social activity that tended not to include the consumption of alcohol. Although drinking may help young people to muster the courage to chat up other girls and boys, once they were actually dating, teenagers tended to avoid or reduce consumption. Drinking was something they did only when in the company of their friends, not whilst dating. Once a couple split up, the teenagers usually returned to their old group and started drinking again. It was only when the young people were a little older and had started drinking indoors – either at house parties or in clubs or bars – that alcohol became a routine feature of romantic relationships.

The limits that parents imposed on young people's time, finances and leisure activities provided a boundary inside which the group drinking culture developed. However, young drinkers were constantly attempting to push this boundary by employing strategies to avoid parental attempts at supervising their behaviour. As the young people grew older, parents had a tendency to relax constraints around alcohol consumption. In response, teenagers tended to exploit these opportunities to drink, particularly if one set of parents had a more lenient attitude towards teenage drinking than others.

Experiences of alcohol-related harm

Almost all the teenage drinkers interviewed recounted episodes of either having completely lost control when drinking or having been around others who had experienced the unpleasant effects of extreme alcohol intoxication. Such incidents, although not welcomed, were considered to be a legitimate part of the drinking process, an acceptable risk that happens to everyone at some point. As a result, most of the friendship groups would look after and protect group members who were too drunk to look after themselves. This altruistic behaviour also had an element of self-preservation. It was considered likely that if a group member was unable to sober up sufficiently before going home, leading to discovery by his or her parents, then all the group members would get into trouble when the parents contacted each other.

Episodes of loss of control were considered a learning experience by many of the young drinkers. As these episodes were both an individual and a shared group experience, they could trigger a shift in drinking culture within the group, as it tried to minimise the risk of it occurring again. In response, young drinkers would sometimes change the type of drink consumed or the venue they drank in to minimise risk, but as such decisions were often based on faulty reasoning surrounding the cause of the excessive drunkenness (it was due to the cold air, the fizziness of the drink or the type of mixer used rather than a lack of individual self-control), the effectiveness of these tactics may have been limited. Most harm recalled by the teenage drinkers was relatively minor and was associated with the effects of acute intoxication. However, a small number of more serious incidents were experienced, including a teenage pregnancy following a 'one-night-stand'. One of the most serious threats to young drinkers was becoming involved in drunken fights with other young people or adults. Such confrontations had the potential to result in serious physical harm to the young people involved.

Conclusions

Our analysis suggests that underage alcohol consumers are far removed from the typical portrayal of out-of-control binge drinkers hell bent on getting 'wasted' on alcohol. In fact, young drinkers place considerable emphasis on being able to control their drinking behaviour. They are sophisticated consumers, making complex judgements about the volume, type and pace of their consumption. They employ a range of different strategies to avoid losing control while drinking, which have been developed and refined over several years of illicit consumption. However, many of these strategies are of limited efficacy, and problems do arise when the young drinkers overshoot their desired levels of intoxication. From this position, it can be argued that a greater appreciation of the alcohol idiocultures that emerge within teenage

friendship groups provides novel opportunities for harm reduction interventions aimed at promoting and teaching more effective strategies for the control and regulation of alcohol consumption within groups of underage drinkers. These may include very basic goal-setting skills (e.g. setting a limit on the number of drinks to be consumed before going out and counting the number of drinks consumed when out drinking), training groups to identify and manage high-risk drinking situations (e.g. tips on how to pace drinking and to better monitor others' level of intoxication) and developing strategies to minimise harm associated with drinking (e.g. avoiding physical confrontations, getting home safely, practising safe sex).

1 Background

The changing alcohol landscape

The heady mix of teenagers and alcohol has been an almost constant worry for adults. Recently, these fears have crystallised around media images of binge-drinking teenagers (especially potent are pictures of young women) sprawled across city centres late at night (France, 2007). Although alcohol consumption by young people was relatively stable throughout the 1980s, changes in drinking patterns amongst teenagers can be detected from the 1990s, coinciding with wider changes in youth culture, in particular the emergence of the dance music scene and its associated illicit drug use (Parker *et al.*, 1998; Brain, 2000; Newburn and Shiner, 2001). Comparing teenagers today with previous generations reveals that there has been little change in the proportion who consume alcohol or in the frequency of consumption. However, in recent years there does appear to have been an increase in the average volume consumed by teenage drinkers (Department of Health, 2005; Smith and Foxcroft, 2009).

In response to declining on-licence sales, and a partial displacement effect caused by the increasing use of ecstasy as a leisure drug amongst young people, the alcohol industry re-commodified a range of alcohol products to cultivate the lucrative youth and female drinker markets (Brain, 2000). Today, young people are exposed to an alcohol marketplace that is dominated by a handful of global producers promoting an increasing range of cheap high-strength ciders and lagers, brand extensions of popular spirits, premixed ready-to-drink (RTD) spirits, imported premium beers and 'starter drinks' (i.e. sweetened beverages, such as WKD and Sidekick, in which the taste of alcohol is disguised by the use of sugar and fruit flavours) (McKeganey *et al.*, 1996; Hughes *et al.*, 1997; M. Jackson *et al.*, 2000). Unlike draught beers and traditional spirit-based drinks, many of these new products are, by design, available in similar formats at both on-licence and off-licence premises.

Licensing deregulation has moved the UK towards '24-hour' drinking. The alcohol-focused night-time economy is seen by many local authorities as a major tool for stimulating the urban regeneration of post-industrial city centres (Hobbs *et al.*, 2005). The transition from a society based on manufacturing and production to one dominated by consumption has been mirrored by shifts in the nature of British pubs away from traditional working-class male drinking dens to modern leisure/entertainment establishments targeted at particular consumer groups, one of which is young people (Pratten, 2003, 2007). Much of the alcohol industry is now focused on creating and stimulating an increasing demand for new commodities, experiences and pleasures amongst young consumers (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007).

Measham and Brain (2005) have argued that these broad social changes (increases in youth drug use, the development of new alcohol products, economic deregulation and the transition to a consumerist society) have led to the emergence of a new culture of intoxication in which extreme drunkenness is tolerated and opportunities for *hedonistic consumerism* are increased. In contrast to previous generations, when there was a clearer distinction between alcohol products purchased by young people (for example, cheap fortified wines and beers) and those consumed by adults (for example, draught beers and wine), today's teenagers have access to a greater range of lifestyle alcohol products sold in licensed premises. Young people are now much more able to participate in the expanding consumerist alcohol culture.

The changing nature of the alcohol landscape inhabited by teenagers today has not resulted in a major shift in either the age at drinking onset or the proportion of young people consuming alcohol (Newburn and Shiner, 2001; Hibell *et al.*, 2009). Rather, the last two decades have seen a considerable increase in the volume of alcohol consumed by those young people who do drink (Department of Health, 2004; Westlake and Yar, 2006; NatCen/NFER, 2007; Fuller, 2009; Smith and Foxcroft, 2009).

In addition to fundamental changes in the alcohol marketplace, recent reviews of UK alcohol consumption have consistently identified the relative affordability of alcohol as a key contributory factor in increased consumption (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2004; Rabinovich *et al.*, 2009). The price of alcohol relative to household income has declined steadily since the 1960s, coinciding with parallel increases in household expenditure on alcohol and in per capita volume of alcohol consumed. Although underage drinkers are likely to be less susceptible than adults to fluctuations in the price of alcohol, its affordability appears to play a role in determining consumption amongst teenagers (Gallet, 2007), as does the level of disposable income available to young drinkers (McCrystal *et al.*, 2007a).

Hedonism and alcohol consumption

Researchers attempting to catalogue the evolution of youth culture in recent years have commented on the expansion of the marketisation and commodification of youth (see France, 2007). Increasingly, teenagers are seen as a lucrative niche consumer market, particularly in relation to fashion, new media technology and lifestyle products. Producers are eager to stimulate new wants and desires within the consumer market and to develop and promote new products to meet those needs. In parallel, new methods of communicating with consumers have emerged (including viral marketing, social network sites and blogs) and have been rapidly adopted by young people. Although most teenagers are legally unable to purchase alcohol, this expansion of teenage consumer culture has also incorporated alcohol.

Defining drinking culture

If culture is the coalescence of the shared behavioural norms and cognitions within a specific population (as distinct from those shared by some other population) (Lehman *et al.*, 2004), then *drinking culture* can be defined as the social customs, habits and rules shared by groups of drinkers that surround their consumption of alcohol in specific social settings. These tacit rules may encompass many aspects of drinking, including (i) the types of beverages consumed, (ii) the purpose of drinking, (iii) the social setting and (iv) the group actions (if any) employed to regulate or control consumption behaviour. Such drinking cultures may evolve through the social interaction of group members, and could be susceptible to both internal and external influences such as changes in group membership, the on-going maturation of participating young people and the local environment in which the consumption occurs (alcohol availability, local social control and neighbourhood space). Gary Fine (1979) referred to this as 'idioculture'. This cultural system is shared by interacting group members, is used by them to facilitate further group interactions and provides the bridge between the environment and group choices and actions (in this case their alcohol consumption patterns).

Notwithstanding major changes in teenage consumption, little is known about adolescent drinking cultures and how they are produced. The existing literature on drinking cultures has focused primarily on cross-national differences in adult drinking (e.g. Heath, 1995). Furthermore, despite the availability of extensive survey data, evidence is somewhat lacking as to where, why and in which social contexts young people drink (Wright, 1999; Newburn and Shiner, 2001). Studies of female and adolescent drinking cultures are still relatively rare (South, 2007). There are also few studies of moderate teenage drinkers, who make up the largest proportion of adolescent consumers. The broader literature on youth culture can also be criticised for failing to unpick the complex nature of youth cultures, exhibiting a tendency to categorise youth as a single cultural grouping (Wyn and White, 1997), separate from adult culture (Muncie, 1999), and failing to account for the structures of gender, income and class.

Research aim

The key aim of this study was to examine the dynamics of teenage peer group drinking cultures. Towards this end, we adopted a micro-sociological/social psychological perspective, which focuses on the micro-culture of a small number of teenage friendship groups, as opposed to the general macro-culture surrounding underage drinking.

The specific study objectives were as follows:

- to develop a profile of peer group drinking cultures by examining perceptions of drinking culture in young people aged between 11 and 16 and how peer groups affect attitudes and drinking behaviours among this age group;
- to use a narrative approach to track the life history of the peer group to uncover the tacit rules surrounding drinking behaviour;
- to study the gender and class dynamics in young people's drinking cultures;
- to examine the relationship between early teenage drinking cultures and drinking patterns (at age 18/19) during the transition to adulthood;
- to generate evidence-based policy and practice recommendations for the prevention of alcohol-related harms.

Methodology

The study draws on extensive social network data collected within the Belfast Youth Development Study (BYDS). The BYDS is a large-scale longitudinal study that has tracked a single age cohort of around 4,000 young people who entered secondary school (year 8) in September 2000. The BYDS questionnaire contains items on alcohol and drug use, offending, contact with the criminal justice system, family life and engagement with education (for further details of the BYDS methodology see McCrystal *et al.*, 2006, 2007b). In addition, respondents were asked to complete a series of peer nomination questions within each sweep. This peer nomination data was used to identify and select friendship groups within the school year group (see Appendix I for information on how social networks were identified).

Sample

The peer nomination data was used to select potential peer groups for interview. Interviewees were paid £20 for the completion of the interview. A total of 36 interviews across eight groups were completed. In addition, five individual interviews were conducted, giving a grand total of 41 completed interviews. The individual interviews did not germinate into full completed groups as the invited group members confirmed that the selected group did not socialise outside school or drink alcohol in each other's company. Essentially, these individuals belonged to non-BYDS friendship groups. The data collected from these interviews was still valuable as it provided an additional comparison with the group cultures established within the BYDS cohort friendship groups. All interviewees were aged 18 or 19 at the time of interview. Table 1 provides brief details of the peer groups included within the study (see Chapter 2 for a more extensive description of each group).

Table 1: Group interviewees

Group	Members	School type	Comments
1	Four boys	Boys' Catholic secondary	Had network links with group 2, both inside and outside school, but by age 15 they no longer socialised with members of group 2. High-risk drinkers
2	Three boys	Boys' Catholic secondary	Had social contact with group 1; however, they later distanced themselves from these individuals because of their (group 1) enthusiasm for getting into fights. Moderate drinkers
3	Three girls	Girls' Protestant grammar	Good friends throughout school career and later. Two attend the same university. Moderate drinkers
4	Five girls	Girls' Catholic secondary	Three core members with the two additional friends more on the periphery of the group. Moderate and high-risk drinkers
5	Three girls and two boys (plus two boys on the periphery of the group)	Mixed-sex Protestant grammar	The core members of this group were the three girls. The boys drifted in and out of the group during the early years of secondary school. By age 15 two of the boys were established group members. The remaining two boys remained fringe members with relatively limited social contact outside school. Moderate and high-risk drinkers
6	Five girls	Girls' Catholic grammar	Strong cohesive long-term friendship group from primary grammar school onwards. Late-onset low-level drinkers
7	Four boys	Boys' Catholic secondary	Stable friendship group across the school years. One member later excluded from the group owing to hard drug use. Moderate and high-risk drinkers
8	Five girls	Mixed-sex Protestant grammar	Strong group through first to fifth form. Members began to drift apart in sixth form. Alcohol played an important role in these membership changes. Religiosity is an important characteristic of this group. Low-risk drinkers

Interviews

As the young people were asked to recall their drinking behaviour over a six-year period (age 12–18), it was important that when specific drinking incidents were discussed the sequencing of events was recorded. It was essential that incidents and behaviours were placed in their correct chronological order. To facilitate this, the interview was structured around four key periods that should be memorable to most young people: (a) the young person's first unsupervised use of alcohol, (b) the emergence of more regular (i.e. weekly) drinking patterns, (c) a drinking episode when they lost control of their consumption or suffered an adverse consequence (e.g. they got really drunk or got in a fight) and (d) the transition from drinking on the street or in the home to drinking in pubs and clubs. Discussion of other behaviours and experiences was located relative to these key time markers.

The key topics explored within the interview included the participants' choices, opinions and experiences of alcohol consumption across five broad categories:

- their own alcohol consumption within the group;
- their friends' drinking behaviour;
- their parents' drinking behaviour;

- the types of activities they engaged in when consuming alcohol; and
- any incidents of trouble or harm relating to alcohol consumption.

The guide was used as a frame of reference for the interview and to minimise the possibility of generating a range of irrelevant responses. Moreover, it was used flexibly, allowing the interviewers to explore new issues in more detail as they emerged, both during the interview and in the analyses of earlier interviews. Further details on the methodology used within this study can be found in Appendix I.

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 provides a short introduction to the various groups, their members and their overall drinking style. It provides basic background context on the young people involved in the study. Chapter 3 is the first of the four main analysis chapters. It details the various tacit rules and regulations developed by groups to organise their alcohol consumption and how these changed over their teenage years. It reflects what, when, where and how the young people purchased and consumed alcohol, and with whom. Most teenage drinking involves intoxication, and for this reason Chapter 4 looks at the specific techniques and strategies that groups developed to control their getting drunk. Young people strive to achieve a sufficient level of drunkenness (this varies on a group-by-group basis) and avoid adult detection. Chapter 5 looks at the relationships that existed both within and outside social groups. Drinking is a social activity and young people play a variety of roles within drinking groups. Underage drinking is far from a risk-free activity. Chapter 6 provides details of the physical and social harms experienced by the young drinkers and considers factors that appear to increase the likelihood of harmful incidents. Chapter 7 identifies a series of policy and practice recommendations based on the analysis conducted within this study.

2 An introduction to the groups

Teenage drinking idiocultures are the product of many years of small-group interaction. Small-group culture emerges from social contact amongst group members and is shaped by prior shared events, knowledge and interactions. While the introduction of alcohol into the friendship group may act as a triggering event, altering the cultural repertoire of the group, the incorporation of alcohol consumption within the group idioculture is itself shaped by existing cultural elements of the group, what Gary Fine (Fine, 1979; Harrington and Fine, 2006) refers to as the group's collective cultural memory.

This chapter provides a general introduction and overview of the friendship groups participating in this study. As such, it describes the general makeup of each group, discusses some of their general characteristics and depicts their broad drinking style. It will introduce a number of key themes and concepts considered in more depth later.

Group 1: The Peacocks (four boys interviewed)

All four members of this group attended the same single-sex secondary school in Belfast. Three members of the group had grown up together on the same working-class estate, while the remaining member lived outside Belfast and hovered on the periphery of the group.

Their first occasion of unsupervised drinking occurred when one member was introduced to alcohol through his older brother and his friends. This individual then encouraged his friends to start to drink:

I'd say here, 'I, I was drunk last week you know, why – why don't we do it again this week?', and then that's how they started doing it (10101).¹

The group started consuming drinks such as Buckfast and cider before progressing to beer. Describing themselves as 'dirt poor' (10101), with very little money with which to socialise, they chose beverages according to price: 'Whatever we got was the cheapest, it was disgusting like, but you got it 'cos it was cheap, you know' (10152).

Two of the group had sheds at the foot of their gardens. Up until age 16 they tended to hang out in one of these. This satisfied their parents' desire to keep them off the streets and, at the same time, they were free from the watchful eye of residents within the local neighbourhood. The group was fearful of being spotted by someone who knew their parents, and of attacks by certain adults within the community, namely the local paramilitary groups, who frequently reacted adversely to young people drinking on their streets:

... they were all ex-Provies [Provisional IRA] ... vigilantes really, I suppose, and you woulda got a chase off them if you were out in the street or if you didn't get into the valley quick enough ... (10023).

When they started drinking in local bars (aged 16), there was shift in their drinking careers as they had 'grown out of the ciders and stuff ...' (10023) because of 'all the kids drinking it' (10023). Some members switched to beer, whereas others progressed to spirits (vodka, whisky and Southern Comfort).

For example, the peripheral member of the group who was unable to drink beer would drink whisky: ‘... hanging round with xxxxx – that sort of got me into drinkin’ whisky’ (10136). At first they split a half-bottle between two, then progressed to drinking a half-bottle each.

Drinking was all about displaying an image – ‘I’m brilliant! [laughs]. Look at what I can do!’ (10101) – and cultivating a reputation as ‘... the big heavy drinkers’ (10101). This was often bolstered by routine displays of drinking prowess designed to impress local girls and older young people the group looked up to: ‘... in your head you said “ah, I have to drink loads” and then people’ll think I’m mad the way I can drink loads and not be drunk’ (10152). There was also a clear expectation that, when out drinking, everyone would keep up with the pace of drinking and would ‘hold their own’ (10023).

With a drinking style characterised by high levels of individual consumption, members were expected to look out for themselves if they got too drunk. They would purchase their own alcohol and assumed that ‘what’s yours is yours’. On the few occasions that money was pooled to buy alcohol, its distribution was made on the basis of the relative financial contribution of each member. Altruistic acts of sharing alcohol always had to be reciprocated ‘[you] can’t drink any more than your half and, if you do, you have to replace it’ (10101).

There was an aggressive undercurrent to their exchanges with other individuals, spurred by a feeling that it is important to defend their status in social settings. A reputation for being ‘... the big fucking hard lad ...’ (10101) was important to the group, and was something that had to be maintained. Indeed, one member was notorious for getting into fights when out drinking – ‘every time I started drinking I always got a smack on the mouth’ (10101) – usually after ‘a 15-pack of Harp and ... like a half-bottle of Southern Comfort’ (10101), highlighting the importance of the group status within the local youth culture.

As they got older, all members of the group reduced their drinking. Although they still got drunk, this occurred less frequently than when they were younger, and was usually contingent on some important occasion (e.g. a birthday), when they would ‘go out and get absolutely juiced!’ (10101). Even the peripheral member, who felt he was ‘sensible’ and quite often ‘sober’ when out socialising, cut down on his alcohol consumption after finding out he ‘... had an ulcer like ’cos it was so painful’ (10136). A core member of the group also reduced his alcohol consumption following the realisation that money was more of a concern than reputation:

You get older and you realise, well, OK, you’ve drunk eight and you’re still not drunk, I’ve drunk four and I’m pissed. Therefore [laughs] I’ve spent less money than you and I don’t even care what you say! (10101).

Another core member also cut back on his alcohol consumption as a result of changes in his social situation:

You would work 10 to 10 on a Saturday and a Sunday so after it you’re not really up for anything ... [also] I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardise it [the boxing] you know, my fitness and that there. I’m, you know, too focused on that, like, you know, I wouldn’t let drinking get in the way of it at all (10023).

Group 2: The Three Musketeers (three boys interviewed)

This all-male clique attended the same school as The Peacocks. Two members lived in close proximity to each other, while the third lived a short distance away, frequently meeting up with the others either by taxi or by getting a lift from his parents. When growing up, the boys were keen Gaelic football players and football remains an important part of their identity: ‘... we all love our football...’ (10142). Members had limited money to spend on alcohol (£5–10 per week), and came from a poor estate, where many of their friends had problems with alcohol or drugs:

... because of their families, of the way their families have brought them up. It's like their daddy's an alcoholic or they can't get jobs ... or they've had a bad experience in life ... They just can't get out of the rut and they've just kept going into it and then it becomes like (ahm) getting up every morning and brushing your teeth (10142).

Although not a delinquent group, they were exposed to a wide range of antisocial activities on their estate. One member reported noticing changes in his neighbourhood, observing that over the years it had started 'to get noisier ...' (10199) and that 'the boys were starting to pint [drink beer] or get more streetwise ... doing the drinking and drugs and stealing of cars and stuff' (10199). Another member also commented on the antisocial behaviour of young people where he lived:

... not so much nowadays because of people clearing them away, but last two or three years there's a group and every single, I'd say, weekend without a fail, they'd been there [outside a local shop] from 3 or 4 o'clock [pm] right through to 3 or 4 o'clock [am] in the morning, drinking ... (10142).

Referring to them as 'scumbags' (10142), the boys were keen to disassociate themselves from such people: '... they would've knew me but I wouldn't have had nothing to do with them' (10142). They were also keen to avoid The Peacocks (group 1), who they considered to be 'stoners' (10199) as they had started taking drugs and because one member tended to start fights when out drinking:

xxxxx would go down and start a fight with these uns, or whatever, that's when I would've just said 'boys see ya later' not, not for me. I was a chicken probably like. I was too scared to see what would happen (10199).

Around age 13, the group would hang out on some waste ground (known as the fields) where other older young people socialised as well. Although not drinking at this stage, they were surrounded by alcohol: '... Everyone would've had a bottle of beer and I drank a milkshake or a bottle of water' (10199). By age 15, two members started drinking because everyone else was doing it. The youngest member, who described himself as '... the sensible one ...', didn't start drinking until later in that year (although also aged 15) because he would 'be playing football' (10101) the next day. He eventually started drinking because he liked the 'social aspect' associated with alcohol consumption.

The group would drink in a shed located in the fields once every two weeks on a Friday or Saturday night. They never drank on the streets, as they viewed it as 'scummy' and they didn't 'want to be known as scum, ever' (10142). Initially, alcohol was procured by older relations or friends because they '... looked older than everybody else' (10142). Their drinking style was relatively contemporary, consuming RTD spirits such as Red Square, before progressing to cider and beer.

When the group moved on to pubs and clubs (aged 17/18), they started to consume beers, shots and other spirits. For about two years, they frequented a local bar every Saturday, because everyone from school was there. However, they would leave early to avoid 'the rush' and fights as '... There's always something kicks off and we just couldn't be bothered with all that crap ...' (10142). Two members of the group acknowledged that they consumed alcohol to get drunk, whereas one member insisted '[I] don't do drunk' (10142), in spite of what seemed to be a relatively high level of consumption:

... I was drinking before I went out and then I went out and had two double vodkas and Red Bulls and then after that here's me 'na, I don't wanna drink any more' (10142).

Members were expected to show allegiance to their friends – 'these are my friends, I have to do what they do' (10199) – ensuring that the others got home safely, particularly when drunk, and buying

each other drinks when they didn't have any money. Adhering to the philosophy of 'one for all, all for one', members had to stand up for each other if any fights occurred: 'it's just one of them things you have to do [shifts position] where you just back up your friends' (10095). However, this loyalty extended only to the core members of the group and not to other boys from their school (group 1): '... we tagged along but never would I have threw a punch or got into a fight for any of them [group 1]' (10199).

One member left school at 16 to take up a trade as a bricklayer. He reported a subsequent reduction in his drinking, in part as a result of passing his driving test: '... for about a year after I started driving I went out and just didn't drink, so I always brought the car' (10095). The other two members went on to study at university. One noticed that this coincided with an increase in his drinking as he had 'more free time ... I'm only in four hours a week' (10142) while the other member reported cutting back on his alcohol consumption as he got older, commenting that 'at the start it was go out to get drunk, but then, once you got older, it was go out to pull a girl ...' (10199). Fed up with getting really drunk, he now drinks to enjoy himself: 'that's when I started to say, right, "you don't need to go out and get absolutely drunk, let's just go out, chill out and have a good night" ' (10199).

Group 3: The Preppy Girls (three girls interviewed)

This middle-class group of girls attended the same single-sex grammar school in Belfast. Living in a prosperous part of the city, they had relatively high levels of disposable income (e.g. £10–20 per week). Their parents permitted them to drink, and at 15/16 years of age often provided them with alcohol – '... her parents would always have had drinks there for us and all our parents knew about that ...' (29064) – but they were not aware of the extent of the girls' drinking.

By age 13/14 the group was part of a broader, social crowd of around 15–20 young people. Around this time, two distinct groups emerged: '... a group of people probably a bit more alternative and a group of people who were quite popular ...' (29064). One girl left the group to join in with 'the alternative type' (29064) at Belfast City Hall, where she became immersed in a Goth subculture and started drinking alcohol. She blames this on another girl she no longer speaks to, 'since then we've never been as close as we were then and I, I sort of resented like sort of being pulled into that whole phase ...' (29064). Although the others occasionally socialised at City Hall, they did not hang out with her, nor did they drink. By fifth form (aged 15–16), they were part of a much larger fluid network of young people which would chop and change on evenings out: '... people started crossing over' (29018).

One member acted as an organiser for the wider social crowd, rounding people up and getting them to decide where to go: '... I've always found myself quite a, quite a good organiser ...' (29036). The youngest and smallest member of the group was quite passive in her role: '... I'm never the person that organises it all because I'm not interested ... in "we're doing this" or "we're doing that" ' (29064). Other members described her as 'the wee baby of the group' (29018).

The purpose of drinking was to 'be cool' as opposed to getting drunk. Alcohol served as a 'social aid' (29018), giving them self-confidence in social settings so that they could talk to anyone and 'dance around like a fool' (29036). It also provided the means to lose their inhibitions and 'act like idiots for a while' (29036) and 'do funny things' (29036) just for a laugh. Drinking occurred '... never ... during the week' (29064) but was limited to 'sometimes, I'm sure, both, and sometimes just a Friday or a Saturday ...' (29064). The group members described themselves as being 'quite well-behaved' (29018) even when drinking: 'our group was quite sensible really 'cos a lot of us were quite sporty' (29018).

The first unsupervised drinking occurred at around age 12. They started by drinking cider and alcopops because they '... didn't taste, like, any different from, like, a fruit drink ...' (29064). At times they would mix drinks to make '... their own wild concoctions of stuff' (29018). Whereas the boys opted for the three-litre bottles of cider, the girls opted for the one-litre bottles because '... three litres just seemed like so much ...' (29036). Drinks were purchased by older siblings, friends who 'looked the oldest' (29036) or 'the tallest' boys (29036). Alternatively, if someone had 'an older sibling with an ID that looked

like them' (29036) it would be used to purchase alcohol from an off-licence known not to undertake rigorous ID checks. Over time, some of the girls progressed to vodka because 'it was cheap ... [and] ... stronger than beer or cider or anything like that' (29018). They would share a half-bottle of vodka between three, progressing to a ten-glass (full) bottle over time.

Although the girls did recount some drinking on the street or in local parks, most of their early drinking was done in friends' homes, often facilitated and loosely supervised by older siblings who were left in charge when parents were out. As the group grew older, larger house parties became more frequent, and were undertaken with parental permission as long as certain conditions were met (e.g. that they stayed in the kitchen or conservatory). The girls found it easy to gain access to licensed premises from a relatively young age (around age 15).

By 16 years, the group gradually shifted from drinking alcopops, which 'just started to taste like sugar' (29036), to wine, which became 'the pre-going-out drink' (29018). Even some parents would provide them with wine to drink before they would go out to socialise in pubs and clubs: '... her mum's always like, "well I don't drink this, and I don't drink that, so you can have it" To be honest a bottle of cheap rosé between three of you is not going to be put any of you in hospital' (29018).

Once out, they switched to spirits and premixed drinks: '... we would have changed to vodka and, with like a mixer or something like that ... and then I probably drunk alcopops then as well because you were, like, out and they were cheap' (29064).

The amount of alcohol they consumed in bars was dictated by the amount of money they had to spend and the promotional offers available. One member reported feeling under pressure to consume greater volumes of alcohol in pubs as they were in '... an older territory and it was sort of like you have to keep up with everyone else and you can't look sort of like you don't drink or can't look like you're not up for having fun' (29064). This member reported consuming a lot more alcohol since going to university, which she puts down to drinking games played at university, such as 'name games or clapping games or stupid faces games' (29036). She is now more confident in her drinking ability and displays her drinking prowess in front of others: 'now that I'm more in contact with boys ... I feel like more able to say, you know, like, I feel that I could drink quite a bit as much as a boy could' (29064). The other members reported a reduction in their drinking since attending university because they '... haven't got the money' (29064) to spend on alcohol. Both these girls now prefer to frontload: '... I have more fun whenever I have like maybe a bottle of wine between a couple of people before I go out and then don't drink anything else when I'm out, 'cos its so much cheaper as well' (29018).

Group 4: The Emoters (five girls interviewed)

This group of five girls attended the same single-sex secondary school in Belfast. Three of the girls are now working and two are studying for third-level qualifications at university in Northern Ireland. Coming from a traditional working-class background, they had relatively little disposable income, but were able to save pocket money and dinner money during the week to spend at the weekends. Three members developed close, solid friendships which still remain in place 'aye, like, all of them would still be my friends, like today' (31036). However, two of the members never really became fully immersed in the group, drifting in and out before eventually leaving. For example, after her first drinking experience, one of these girls would socialise with the group only when alcohol was not involved: '... we would go the pictures and stuff like that but ... not back to have a carry out again, never alcohol related!' (31071). The other peripheral member drifted in and out of lots of different peer groups in her area when she was younger, 'Yes, I mingled in and out of the groups ... like ... I'd hang about with them uns and then go for a while with a different group' (31019).

Three of the girls had their first drinking experience at their friend's house at approximately 13/14 years of age. They met up with older boys (16/17 years of age) from their neighbourhood, who purchased the alcohol for them. They began to socialise with the boys only when they were ready to drink. Alcohol

was a way of gaining entrance to this particular group. This first drinking occasion was the result of a spontaneous decision to try alcohol. They consumed 'four wee bottles of WKD' (31075) because of its pleasant taste: 'it's sweeter' (31071). The bottles of alcohol were not shared – everyone bought and drank their own. As they got older, their drinking session became a weekend routine, with two of the core group members calling at their friend's house (the dominant member) on a Saturday evening. Although much of their early drinking took place on the street, they preferred to drink indoors: 'our mummies didn't really know we drank, so didn't want them driving past or something. It was safer in someone's house [laughing]' (31075).

For much of their teenage years, the group's drinking was dominated by premixed brands such as WKD and Bacardi Breezer and their cheaper alternatives. Every few weeks or so, as their tolerance increased, they would add an extra bottle to the amount of alcohol purchased. Later, some members began drinking cider, sharing a three-litre bottle, as it was cheaper than buying premixed drinks. Up until the age of 16/17, they concealed their alcohol consumption from their parents, as they were strict concerning alcohol: 'Obviously, everyone's mummy didn't allow them to drink' (31071). When the girls turned 16, their parents' attitude relaxed somewhat. By now their parents were aware of their alcohol consumption and would even purchase the alcohol for them. At this time, the girls also made the transition from drinking on the streets/in houses to drinking in bars.

Occasionally, the girls would have one or two drinks at home, while getting ready to go out. This preloading was the only time they would drink alone. In pubs and clubs they continued to drink WKD or Bacardi Breezers, and occasionally cocktails. They were susceptible to drinks promotions, and some members of the group switched to drinking vodka and other spirits when discounted: 'a nightclub we used to go to, they used to have a double vodka and Red Bull for a fiver' (31051). They would take turns to buy rounds for each other, usually two drinks at a time. This would reduce to a single drink if they felt they were getting too drunk too early. Although they insisted that they never forced each other to drink, rather it was just something that they wanted to try because they were curious, one girl in the group was a fast drinker and encouraged the others to keep up (e.g. telling them to hurry up). Furthermore, one of the peripheral members of the group said that, with hindsight, her decision to drink resulted from the need to conform to the actions of the rest of the group: '... thinking back now, it's like it was absolutely down to peer pressure ...' (31071). On average, they would each consume around 8–12 drinks (measures or bottles of alcopops) during a night out.

One member felt that she had cut back on her alcohol consumption in recent years: '... like now as I get older I feel as if I don't drink as much ...' (31051). However, that said, she acknowledged that her drinking does increase significantly when she is out in pubs and clubs: '... but, now when I go out sometimes I would drink more than others but not really if I was just drinking in the house I wouldn't really drink that much' (31051). Now that they are older, there is greater individual variation in their drinking style than observed in their teens: 'well now we'd all just drink our own things like we would all just drink what we want, 'cos we know what we like now, you know what I mean?' (31075).

They associated increased intoxication with having a better time when out. However, they did have their limits, not wanting to go home drunk. Furthermore, although much of their drinking remains reserved for the weekend, on occasions they go out during the week, usually in response to negative and unsatisfactory emotions:

... we only really drink on a Saturday but sometimes, like, you'd drink on a Thursday or something if you were maybe like fighting with your mother or something, you know what I mean? You might say 'do you wanna go out?' Just, just better than arguing it out [?], just think it cheers you up a bit (31075).

Generally, drinking for this group was mostly about the mood-enhancing effects: 'It just made you get happier or something' (31051).

Group 5: The Smart Rebels (three girls and two boys plus another two boys on the periphery of the group)

This group of girls and boys attended the same coeducational grammar school in Belfast. They were proud of their school, describing it as ‘an awesome ... very respected school throughout Northern Ireland and Belfast especially’ (09106).

The friends would regularly come together to drink in the park, where they ‘... would meet different groups ... [laughing]’ (09036). This environment was regularly monitored by the police, from whom they would ‘... just run away and hide somewhere [laughs]’ (09001), and local residents, who would report back to their parents – ‘my uncle who seen me with them would have been quite concerned and would’ve phoned my mum ...’ (09001) – or contact the police directly: ‘we were too rowdy for the neighbours and they called the police on us’ (09106). Despite being exposed to antisocial behaviour, the group never engaged in delinquency: ‘... I mean there were people who came into the park looking for fights or people who would’ve wrecked places ... none of us were like that ever’ (09036). Yet, they ‘... were always noisy ...’ (09140) and they did have a few close shaves with rival groups, which caused them to retreat indoors: ‘... after that we all kinda stopped going to the park for a while’ (09036).

A core female member had her first unsupervised drinking experience at 12/13 years of age with another group of friends. She introduced the other members of her group to alcohol, and she had a central role in finding a suitable drinking location when they were older (i.e. her boyfriend’s house). By age 13, all three girls were regularly drinking together. The boys had their first unsupervised drink around the same age (i.e. 12/13 years), but after an encounter with the police deferred their drinking careers until they were aged 14.

The friends first started drinking alcopops – usually through straws as they believed it would get them drunk quicker. From a very early stage the purpose of their drinking was ‘... to get drunk’ (09036). However, as alcopops are quite expensive, they were saved ‘for the weekends, [when] we had money’ (09036). Over time the group progressed to cider ‘ ’cos it was cheap’ (09001). The boys were expected to buy and consume all their own drink. However, the girls would share a three-litre bottle of cider (which eventually they learned to mix with blackcurrant) between three, and eventually between two, once they realised they were used to it and able to handle it. As preference and cost came to the fore with increasing age, cider gave way to vodka. The girls would each buy a quarter-bottle of vodka, which they mixed with a two-litre bottle of Coke or Fanta to disguise its taste. One boy (not interviewed), who did not drink cider, would buy a ten-glass bottle of vodka, which he shared with two of the girls; he would consume half the bottle and the two girls shared the remaining half. Purchasing a large bottle to share was more economical than buying smaller bottles.

As they grew older the friends changed their drinking style, and drank in different locations. These changes tended to occur at the group level (i.e. they all made the same adjustment at the same time). For example, after an incident with rival groups in the park, they moved to the church/depot. They would meet there when they were sober during the week and at the weekends when they were drinking. Eventually their drinking moved indoors when they realised that one of their friends had an empty house. This resulted in a shift in their drinking style, as they tended to get ‘merry drunk’ (09036) in the park, but ‘absolutely hammered’ (09036) in the house. One explanation offered for this was that they started to play drinking games in the house. Over time, some members began to drink in more youth-orientated bars (aged 16 years), although these experiences were short-lived. In such venues, the girls would occasionally drink vodka, Malibu or cocktails, although they tended to stick with alcopops, as they were safe, cheaper and presumed to be more difficult to spike.

Although other acquaintances drifted in and out of the group, the five remained ‘close mates’ (09106), and some have even been romantically involved (i.e. boyfriends and girlfriends). However, these were more like close friendships than actual romantic relationships. Although other groups may form around music or sport, this group’s central interest was alcohol, particularly intoxication. Furthermore,

this was self-reinforcing in that the more they experienced it, the more they wanted to do it. Individual members also had their own supplementary social goals that they wished to fulfil when drinking; for some members drinking gave them greater self-confidence, allowing them to be more sociable with others, while for others this was not an important function of drinking.

One male member recently decided to cut back on his drinking, stating 'I'm at a place in my life right now where I am sensible with my drink' (09106). This was in part the result of his past experiences, and in part because of his girlfriend: '... I've been going to church with xxxxx now, my girl, a lot more and I'm not a Christian yet, but it's definitely a process that I think I will be going for' (09106). Other members also reported cutting down on their alcohol consumption – 'you get older and you're more responsible and ... you just wanna sorta go and have a couple of drinks and dance ...' (09001) – while some have recently changed the type of beverage they consume. For most, this is because of previous unpleasant experiences with certain drinks: 'I drink wine rather than anything else now ... I wouldn't [pause] drink vodka ... and cider has tainted, like, my taste for it because of the memory ...' (09036). Indeed, for most members, the most important shift in the type of beverage consumed appears to be towards wine, which they are content to enjoy alone or with their friends: '... I'd sit in the house and just have a glass of wine' (09140); '... the drink now would be beer and a glass of wine, glass of red wine' (09106). It seems that for most group members alcohol will continue to occupy a place in their lives: 'I think I'll always have alcohol in my life, you know' (09140).

Group 6: The Late Starters (five girls interviewed)

Members of this friendship group grew up together on the same estate, attended the same rural primary school and together progressed to secondary education in a single-sex convent grammar school in Belfast. The neighbourhood in which they grew up had a strong sense of community; the girls belonged to the same parish and attended church regularly, with each set of parents knowing each other well. Considering themselves to be modestly affluent, they regarded their neighbourhood as respectable and good. Growing up in a conurbation of Belfast, they described a village-like context, with an identifiable neighbourhood and community feel. There were few options for socialising in the local area aside from visiting each other's homes or watching films at the neighbourhood cinema. This meant centring their early social life on what was available locally in a supervised and safe environment. Only when reaching late adolescence was permission granted by relatively strict parents to experience night life in the city centre. This was coupled with supervised transport to and from venues, and included only venues with heavy security supervision and deemed by parents a 'safe' environment.

Each member of the friendship group, in turn, enjoyed academic success, with studying and school work appearing to be a priority for both them and their parents. This restricted the amount of free time available for leisure activities. Family life for the friends was also characterised by strict parenting and cognisance of their role in the family, be it as the responsible eldest sibling or the well-behaved child in a family of hell-raisers: 'them two were the wild ones [older brother and sister] ... and I always seemed to be the good one' (08122). Each reported that they would have been 'killed' if they had been caught drinking. These close friendships, established over time and bounded by place and belonging, have remained steadfast since leaving school and entering third-level education.

These five girls embarked on their drinking careers only as they were entering adulthood, seeing it as a natural transition in age-appropriate behaviour. Alcopops (WKD and Bacardi Breezers) signalled their entry into the alcohol marketplace at age 17 and were considered the easiest way to access alcohol, in terms of both taste and price: 'They're really sweet and everywhere sells them and usually they do offers on them as well' (08086). From alcopops, they progressed to vodka and mixers and sometimes wine, in particular rosé. Alcohol was occasionally sourced from older siblings associated with the group or more experienced friends, but in the most part was purchased by themselves, using fake ID, in licensed premises, close to their 18th birthdays.

Different individual drinking styles could be observed within this group, with some members drinking more than others. However, drinking always occurred in a safe place, and group members were always looked after by at least one other member of the group. Members had different levels of exposure to alcohol, partly brought to bear by family position (younger siblings had more experience than the eldest in the family) and level of parental monitoring (closer monitoring equated with lower experience levels). These initial teenage experiences influenced their individual drink of choice and also whether or not they ordered drinks at the bar. The aim of the group's drinking was to make sure that everyone was on an even keel but, if this came apart, this could lead to resentment.

The constitution and drinking habits of the group have not changed dramatically over time; levels of consumption still vary, some enjoying more alcohol than others, and group membership remains constant despite the fact that some members now attend universities in England or Scotland. Reputation continues to build in importance for members. Initially considered as a part of their community and family identity, it also distinguishes them from other girls at school, girls whom they describe with a degree of scorn and denigration. Reputation is identified as being important not only to group members as individuals, but also to how they are seen as a collective.

Although this group is characterised by different individual levels of consumption, their collective goal is to ensure the safety of their group. Safety here means not only physical safety but also the integrity of their reputation, which is seen as highly prized. This group engaged in considerable social comparison with other peer groups. There were the 'lightweights': '... she always would have drunk, probably about the same amount as us and got sick no matter what' (08086); the more experienced ones: '... and within that group there were a couple of them would get really drunk' (08087); and the novices: 'there were other ones like that wouldn't have drunk at all, they weren't interested in it and I was one of them, I was like that at the start 'cos I told my Dad I wouldn't' (08087).

Drinking to get drunk is almost exclusively done within this friendship group. Most of the girls are in long-term relationships – three boyfriends are from the same group of male friends – but getting drunk is confined to 'going out with the girls'. Alcohol consumption is generally much lower when with their boyfriends; their boyfriends also tend to avoid drinking to excess in their company. Those in long-term relationships have rarely or never seen their boyfriends drunk and can recall only one or two occasions when they have been indisposed or compromised as a result of excess drinking, events that are reflected on with regret.

The cost of drinking is important and they often frontload to spend as little as possible in a club or bar. Studying and part-time work influence alcohol intake. They do not let alcohol interfere with their college or work responsibilities and limit or omit intake accordingly. None of them or their friends would ever consider drinking and driving. They all have their own drinks and are characterised by these: 'She always has her vodka, vodka and Diet Coke' (08122), and 'xxxxx would be more a wine girl' (08086). Drinking is always associated with going out clubbing; little would be consumed at home or at friends' houses. Drinks that look like alcohol (e.g. soda water and lime) will also be consumed at nightclubs if they want an alcohol-free evening.

Group 7: The Footie Lads (four boys interviewed)

The four boys attended the same coeducational secondary school; all were keen footballers and played for a local team. Growing up in the working-class area of the city, they lived in a traditional neighbourhood that was policed and supervised by the community. Everyone in the local area knew each other, and also knew their parents, grandparents and extended family. Although these social networks placed limits on antisocial behaviour in public, drinking was considered to be harmless fun, bonding with other lads, having a drink in the local park and knocking the football about.

Although they all attended the same school, it was membership of the local football team which established and bound these individuals together. Entry to this socialising network was managed through membership of the football team.

Initiation into alcohol consumption began at the age of 13–14 years, and drinking was done collectively with members of the football team. The older players, only one year their senior, initiated the younger players. Other acquaintances outside the group were used to procure alcohol for the group. However, the group were keen to distinguish their drinking from that of other groups of teenagers around them. During the early stages of alcohol use – drinking alcopops in the local park – another group of slightly older drinkers were also using this territory. The friends were very keen to remain separate from this older group who, at age 17, were drinking far more and drinking to prepare for a stand-off at a local sectarian flash point: ‘They went down to a meeting point for fighting with, you know, like the other, the other religion ... they were hammering to have a fight, that type of attitude, that type of mentality’ (15003). As young teenagers, paper round money was pooled to purchase alcohol on special offer, and they hung around near local off-licences and approached strangers or neighbourhood acquaintances to make their alcohol purchases for them. Their choice of drink was dictated by what offers were advertised in the window. Alcohol purchased was shared equally and was confined to two or three drinks only. They made sure that the entire group avoided detection when purchasing and drinking alcohol, and they also aimed to guarantee safe delivery home past the local neighbourhood police – the local neighbourhood surveillance network of friends, families and acquaintances. Frequency of drinking was dictated by the demands of football training and matches; each group member chose not to drink on the night before football lest they impaired their performance on the pitch.

Girls from school were sometimes in the vicinity of the group, but consuming alcohol in the company of female classmates occurred only when they progressed to drinking in those local pubs and clubs with a fairly lax door code (around age 17). Before this age, girls were avoided at all costs when buying and drinking alcohol outside, as they were seen as a risk for adult detection. It was too risky: ‘we just didn’t want them with us really ... just a fear of being caught’ (15003).

Members drank at their own pace, bought their own drinks and set their own limits. They avoided fights and confrontations and looked after each other, whether fleeing aggressive behaviour or making sure they got home if they had drunk too much. Like other working-class groups, they graduated to traditional pubs at the age of 17/18 and supped a pint or two of beer while playing pool. On a night out they would target pubs that were easy to get in to and had a young crowd.

The friendship network has remained relatively stable since the members have left school and entered further and higher education, with the exception of one member. He drifted from the periphery of the group to total exclusion because of increasingly problematic drug consumption.

The other members still train and play football together when they can. The core member of the group is considered very much a role model by the other members. He has a sensible approach to drinking, looks out for the other members, is the best at football and is driven by a focused career ambition. He doesn’t consider himself to be the de facto leader of the group, but it is clear that he generates considerable respect from the other members.

This group’s members enjoy each other’s company, and alcohol helps them to have fun when out together: ‘I have a laugh and all and I slag all of us, we’re all really bad for slags, all day, constantly giving grief but we all know how to take it so it never really causes arguments really’ (15048). They have fun whether knocking a football around, meeting for a coffee or heading to the bar at night with the aim of having ‘a wee drink and a laugh’ (15048). Alcohol is an aspect of their camaraderie, something they were initiated in together and which forms a harmless element of part of their social life. Priority was placed on having fun and not traditional displays of machismo. They drink to get happy, have a laugh ‘but not to get pissed’ (15048) and ‘be the hard men’ (15028).

Group 8: The Excluded (five girls interviewed)

This friendship group is an all-female group drawn from a coeducational grammar school in a rural market town. Set in Northern Ireland's Bible belt, the area has a recognised drug problem and supports a sizeable heroin-using population. All members of this peer group worked hard at school and enjoyed academic success and all are currently studying for a third-level qualification in a range of subjects including law, medicine, maths and geography. Either one or both parents of each peer group member have strong Christian beliefs, which established rules and expectations of behaviour around alcohol that were adhered to quite strictly by each young woman.

During their school years, a strong bond developed between group members. By sixth form a number of established cliques had developed within the school year group. The girls noted that once you were identified as belonging to one particular peer clique it was almost impossible to move away from that identity. Few girls moved between cliques. It is clear to the group members that they were considered to be 'studious and timid' (51099) by their school peers and were very much on the margins of the social scene at school. Increasingly at this age, socialising moved away from young adolescent pursuits of bowling, the cinema and coffee shops to licensed venues. This served to distance this group even further from their peers, as there was a strong expectation that they would not drink or patronise a venue where alcohol was sold. One member was embarrassed to go somewhere different because she felt everyone would be looking at her, wondering 'what is she doing here?' (51041). They lived in a small rural community with few venues to socialise in. It would have been difficult to change their socialising habits away from the scrutiny of their classmates. Members of the group did report some resentment at missing out, feeling jealous and showing some aspirations to gaining access to other groups.

The first taste of alcohol was almost always a sip of wine offered by a parent or much older sibling. Strict Christian religious beliefs were characteristic of each family and, although alcohol was permitted, it was consumed only occasionally by family members, and in small quantities. Alcohol was offered to taste and the offer was not to be viewed as an invitation or permission to start using alcohol. The group members all had a relatively late introduction to alcohol (age 16+). They felt that there was an obvious barrier to gaining entry to other peer groups and social environments that permitted drinking, and this exclusion also played a role in low levels of consumption as the opportunities to drink were extremely limited. Mobility out of this group created an opportunity to drink for one member, although she never really drank to get drunk. It is clear that opportunities for social mobility of this kind were extremely limited for most members of the group whilst they were still at school.

The friendships remained firm throughout their school years, although to what extent this was a result of their complete exclusion from many of the other school friendship groups and their limited social exposure must be considered. Perhaps the only significant change to this group is the one girl who no longer conceals her alcohol use from her friends. An acknowledgement of alcohol use as fairly normal behaviour has been reached partly because of growing maturity but largely owing to exposure to a broader range of people at university.

The friends still see each other regularly; a number live together in religious denominational communal student halls and many social activities centre on their membership of Christian groups. There is a sense now that the group members do have more tolerant views towards those who choose to drink, which could be attributed to a less naive view of the world gained through university life, but it would seem that they have still not been able to access this scene for themselves. The group member who does drink no longer conceals her alcohol consumption from these friends but would not choose to drink in their company.

Religion plays a part in their decision not to drink. All four low-level drinkers believe that drinking to get drunk is contrary to their beliefs, but they also spoke of the expectations of others of how they should behave. The majority of them still drink only small amounts occasionally. One member of the group does consume higher levels of alcohol from time to time and attributes this behaviour to membership of

an alternative mixed-gender peer group who consider drinking socially appropriate; this behaviour was concealed from her fellow peer group members when at school but, now that they are older and have left school, low consumption levels are seen as more acceptable in the group.

Their knowledge of alcohol has been acquired mainly by observation or the retelling of negative events, and little is based on personal experience. Although purporting to have fairly liberal and tolerant views about alcohol guided by their religious principles, the girls can be quite disparaging about those who drink, and particularly direct ridicule towards young girls who drink to excess. The drink of choice for this group is either alcopops or wine, so-called 'girly drinks', and consumption is confined to one or two drinks per session. The choice of alcoholic drink is based on taste and gendered choices, not the potential effects. The girls associate consumption with no positive benefits other than taste. Quite often, alcohol is not consumed on a night out, and they never go out to just drink. Going out where alcohol is available is permitted if music/dancing or another activity, e.g. a table quiz, is involved. They consider there to be a lot of negative effects of using alcohol based around fear, identity, control, greed and reputation.

3 Drinking etiquette

Introduction

Useable culture is defined as the core values and moral standards that are shared by a group and publicly expressed in the context of group interaction (Fine, 1979). In other words, useable alcohol culture is the shared norms and standards that have been developed by a group about what is deemed acceptable drinking behaviour. This can be considered a *drinking etiquette*, a set of tacit informal rules and regulations surrounding the group's drinking repertoire. It reflects the what, when, where and how drinking occurs, and with whom. It also covers the volume and pace of consumption.

These rules, regulations and rituals vary across drinking groups, and thus groups' drinking etiquette can be compared and contrasted. Linked to this is the concept of *situational appropriateness*, whereby norms of acceptable drinking behaviour are bound by the social context in which consumption occurs. Subtle shifts in this context, for example who is present, the weather or the time by which key members of the group have to be home, will impact on the drinking behaviour of the group.

Drinking purpose and goals

Drinking purpose reflects the broad drinking ambition shared by the group. It is the collective understanding amongst group members of why they drink alcohol. It includes the desired outcome of consumption and the function that alcohol plays in achieving that outcome. This drinking purpose is constructed by group members and accommodates the heterogeneity of individual reasons for drinking, which are numerous even within groups. To an extent, the complexity of peer group drinking defies a simple categorisation. Drinking purpose is not homogeneous across social groups. Although groups share much in terms of their use of alcohol, they differ in terms of the emphasis that they place on different purposes. Drinking purpose also lacks consistency over time and can be observed to change as the group grows older, when new opportunities arise (e.g. when group members are able to get served in bars and clubs), when members leave or join, or when specific triggering events occur (e.g. refraining from consuming alcohol for a period of time after getting caught by the police). Shifts in drinking purpose alter the general alcohol idioculture of the group. Purpose can also be context specific. Here, we consider drinking purpose to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate a wide range of specific drinking goals. Goals are considered to be the drinking outcome of an individual drinking session. Drinking goals sit within the broader drinking purpose of the group.

The evolution of drinking purpose: curiosity, conformity and social habit

Initial contact with alcohol, across all the groups, was driven by individual curiosity. Usually one member of the group was exposed to unsupervised drinking and returned to his or her friends with new-found knowledge. In most cases this initial brief exposure was through the actions of older siblings, relatives or friends. Older (non-adult) acquaintances play an important role in the genesis of early unsupervised drinking. If such individuals do not inhabit the young teen's social world (or at least the social world of someone within their group) when their curiosity about alcohol begins to emerge, the onset of drinking

can be delayed. Initial exposure subsequently triggers an interest in experiencing the effects of alcohol amongst other group members in a cascading contagion process whereby individuals catch the drinking bug:

... they [other members of her group] just sort of got in with these guys [an older group] and then that's when it all started ... they started it before me and then I joined the bandwagon [laughs]' (09001).

The first member of group 1 (The Peacocks) who tried unsupervised drinking with his older brother's peer group bragged to his own friends about the experience. He then provided the basic knowledge on how to access alcohol and to consume it without getting caught. The 13th birthday party of another member of the group provided the opportunity for two of them to try alcohol for the first time. The limited social contact with the fourth member of the group outside the school setting (because he lived further away from the others) appears to have delayed his initiation into alcohol use. Although he drank once with the group at age 14, it wasn't until several years later that he drank again.

In the case of group 7 (The Footie Lads), early initiation (at age 13) occurred in the company of slightly older, more experienced friends. Older members of the football team (aged 14), who had some knowledge of buying alcohol, organised their first drinking session. They went together as a group, stood outside an off-licence and asked a passer-by to purchase the alcohol for them. They had talked about the evening at school the week before, planning what they would buy and where they would go:

... it's not that I intended to go out and drink when I was younger ... it's like a big box of wrapper that says 'DO NOT OPEN' and you're like you wanna (15048).

Even when the age at onset amongst the group was later, say around the age of 16/17, the young people reported feeling very curious about the effect of alcohol. Although worries about how to gain access to alcohol, prohibitive parents and academic work may have contributed to the delayed onset of group 6 (The Late Starters), their excitement and curiosity about alcohol increased as they approached the age of 18. As a group they decided to go to a city centre nightclub for the first time. Their choice of venue was one that some older friends went to on a regular basis: '... so we all went out to xxxxx [a nightclub] and thought we were brilliant' (08107).

The girls were very positive about their delayed entry into the alcohol marketplace, enjoying growing up slowly. They liked the social activities they engaged in as younger teenagers, such as shopping or going to the cinema and youth clubs.

Amongst older young people the first unsupervised drinking session did not necessarily have to be a whole-group experience, with one member initiating the others. In the case of group 2 (The Three Musketeers), initiation of the whole group occurred over a period several months. Likewise, some of the girl-only groups reported that their first use of alcohol was undertaken not as a group but as individuals, although it was discussed in great detail amongst the group members. The ready access to alcohol in the older teenager's home often provided the opportunity to taste spirits such as vodka without parents' approval or knowledge. It was often curiosity about the taste rather than the effects of alcohol that triggered this initial home drinking.

In some cases group members reported trying alcohol for the first time to try to fit in with their friends so as to avoid being the odd one out. Some of the girls interviewed (group 3, The Preppy Girls) noted that they had seen boys their own age drinking and wanted to be part of their group. They considered alcohol as cool and drinking as something you had to do to be part of the right crowd. Even when quite young, alcohol was seen by some of the girls as a badge of status and an activity undertaken by the older 'in-crowd' who hung out in the 'places to be' (for example, the grounds outside Belfast City Hall).

The desire to be part of a particular social scene, to be an insider and not left behind, prompted some of them to try alcohol for the first time.

One boy in group 5 (The Smart Rebels) was introduced to alcohol through his cousin, whereas the girls in the same group were initially introduced to alcohol through the central group member who had prior drinking experience with some older teenagers she knew at school. Here, curiosity was mixed with a desire to impress and to portray a 'cool' image:

I was just in first year in school, so at that stage it wasn't really the fact of wanting to get drunk it was just to look good and ... because you were trying to impress your cousin and his mates and you wanted to look cool (09106).

Similar sentiments were expressed by members of group 4 (The Emoters):

'cos they were doing it, you know, you done it (31071).

Trying alcohol was about '... being a copycat and just trying to act cool in front of them [older teenagers at school] and their friends ...' (09106). In situations such as this, there is a degree of perceived social pressure on the younger drinker to conform to what is considered acceptable behaviour amongst older people. As one of the other group members recounted:

... [I] probably wasn't too sure about doing [it], but like these people, you know, they went to my school and they were a lot older than me and [you] sorta couldn't, not that you couldn't say no, but you didn't really wanna say no (09001).

Similar comments were also made by other respondents:

... thinking back now it's like it was absolutely down to peer pressure ... (31071).

we thought 'cos everybody was drinking so we had a drink along with them (31051).

Although the novelty of the effects of alcohol may drive initiation, the purpose of consumption quickly matures into other drinking goals. Soon after initiation young drinkers begin to recognise and appreciate the distinct pleasures arising from alcohol consumption and, in particular, alcohol intoxication. Intoxication permits young people to have a good time together, to have fun, to party, to lose inhibitions and to chat up other girls or boys. The longevity of our relationship with alcohol consumption is contingent on these pleasures of intoxication:

... apart from waking up with a hangover, I really enjoyed it, it was surreal because I wasn't used to being drunk, it was the first time I was drunk and it was a great night, I have to admit, I can still remember bits of it when I look back and we had a real good laugh (09106).

When asked about the purpose of his early teen drinking, the same interviewee responded simply '... to get drunk' (09106). Teenagers enjoy the intoxicating effects of alcohol. Such pleasures are further heightened by the prohibited nature of underage drinking. The adrenaline rush, the fear of being caught and the challenge of getting away with it all add to the excitement of illicit consumption: '... this is exciting and ... we'll do it every week now' (09140). Members of one group reported that one of the reasons they continued to drink was that it was easy to obtain alcohol and because they kept getting away with it. Despite its forbidden nature, they did not have to suffer any deleterious consequences. The fact that it was taboo added to the appeal of drinking when younger:

I think it was more sort of taboo thing of drinking like because it's portrayed as such a 'oh don't do that'... you want to drink more definitely (29018).

However, this illicit thrill does not last forever. One girl (group 3, The Preppy Girls) reported that drinking lost some of its allure when she turned 18.

As the young people grow older, drinking alcohol makes the transition from an illicit activity engaged in for its own right to being a constant part of the social lives of the young people. It becomes a routine aspect of group socialising, helping the young people achieve a range of different social and lifestyle goals. Although alcohol consumption begins to meet other social functions beyond simple intoxication – as the young drinkers mature – teenage drinking always involves some degree of drunkenness. There is little evidence of what society considers low-level social consumption, although most of the groups consider their consumption relatively low, particularly when compared with that of others. The benchmark for acceptable levels of intoxication amongst most teenage drinkers is set relatively high, although group variations can be observed. To a large degree, the functional role of alcohol intoxication in the lives of older teenagers is similar to that in adult drinkers. It helps them to relax and have fun with their friends. When intoxicated they lose inhibitions, can act the 'eejit', gain the courage to chat up other young people, have a laugh, take risks and do things they normally wouldn't do:

... I hate being the quiet one, so whenever I'm with people who are really loud I have to be loud with them instead of being, like, the bore type of thing. So I would've drank and drank and drank and drank until I lost all inhibitions and I was just all over, just dancing and screaming and shouting and all of the rest of it (09036).

... gives you less inhibition so you have more fun (29036).

The influence of alcohol on the teenagers' lifestyles is not limited to occasions when they are actually drinking. Telling drinking stories plays a big part in the group interactions before, during and after drinking sessions. Going out drinking is important because it provides the main topic of gossip on Monday at school, e.g. 'seen you at the xxxxx on Friday' (10199). It is about going out for a drink and a bit of 'banter'. For some groups, many of the stories revolve around who did the stupidest things when they were out drinking. Some stories focus on bragging about the level of alcohol consumed (as with macho male drinkers). In other situations story content focuses more on the loss of control and inhibitions associated with illicit drinking. As identified by Griffin and colleagues (2009), alcohol consumption can act both as a route into teenage social life, by allowing young people to fit in with the evolving group culture, and also as source material for future group interactions. Alcohol can also play a role in developing group identity, and in displays of status and image associated with that identity. Particularly amongst boys, drinking is a way of supporting an emerging masculine self-image:

... it wasn't really the fact of wanting to get drunk, it was just to look good (09106).

Even amongst the girls in this group, drinking was a way of showing toughness:

... all us girls were like 'well I wanna get drunk' ... 'I wanna look hard when I go back to school' (09036).

As The Peacocks (group 1) matured, the goals of consumption became intertwined with the need to display a hard-man masculine identity. One member said that his group drank because they had it in their heads that they had to drink loads so that people would think they were 'mad', as they were able to consume large quantities of alcohol and not be drunk. As another member put it, 'you wanted to show

you could hold your own' (10023). One even admitted that he never really enjoyed drinking when he was younger, but that it was all part of an 'image thing'" (10152). For this individual, alcohol played an important role in the formation of the group identity. Not drinking alcohol would be incompatible with the group's self-image as working-class lads.

An overemphasis on drinking and intoxication within a group can result in a blurring of the boundary between friendship and intoxication. In this way, alcohol becomes not just a vehicle through which young people achieve social and lifestyle goals, but rather the heart of their leisure activities. Rather than going out to see friends, to have a drink and a good time, the main goal of the evening becomes getting drunk irrespective of the social side. Østergaard (2009) defines this unbounded consumption as when intoxication is 'no longer just a leisure lifestyle, but *the* leisure lifestyle, as school and work loses its constraining, structuring effect' (p. 32).

The trajectory of drinking was relatively similar across all the peer groups. There was a greater degree of homogeneity across groups than was expected at the outset of this research study. Although there was considerable variation in the volume of alcohol consumed in each of the friendship groups studied, the patterns of change in drinking style were relatively similar. Likewise, the different drinking purposes outlined above (socialising, relaxation, loss of inhibitions, identity, status) were observed in almost all groups. To a degree, all the various functions that alcohol can play in social settings were exploited by all the groups. However, different groups placed greater emphasis on particular aspects of drinking purpose, leading to the development of subtle differences in overall drinking idioculture. For some, identity and status (and its association with volume) was a key issue for the group; for others socialising was the primary goal of consumption.

The one exception to this general development was group 8 (The Excluded). Even though the girls were, at times, curious about alcohol, the lack of an older acquaintance who was prepared to introduce them to alcohol, coupled with limited access to alcohol within the home, meant that their contact with alcohol as teenagers was always within supervised settings. Even then, because of the religious beliefs of their parents, exposure to alcohol was limited to birthdays and other family events:

she [Mother] decided to let me have a sip of wine, which wasn't totally enjoyable at the time ... I hated it ... that was the first time and I've never really had wine since ... I didn't really like it at all (51080).

In contrast to all the other groups, members of this group never progressed in their drinking purpose. Their lack of unsupervised drinking meant that they never learnt to appreciate the effects of alcohol beyond its simple taste. Their understanding of the mood-altering consequences of alcohol consumption was almost exclusively obtained second-hand, and as a result they were generally fearful of the potency of alcohol:

I don't see the point in drinking something unless you actually like it. People say 'well, you'll like it eventually', but I don't really see the point in people drinking it until you like it ... I just find it really strange that people drink like that ... well, not that they want to do it, but how much they want to drink sometimes and how they don't stop themselves (51099).

Members of this group had a well-known reputation as non-drinkers. As they grew older and some wanted to try alcohol, they found it quite difficult as they had no-one to introduce them to the typical social setting where most young people were drinking. It was a social world that they struggled to penetrate.

What, when and where

Groups accumulate knowledge as to acceptable types of drinks, times to drink and drinking locations. This knowledge becomes habituated at key time points, shifting only after a triggering event which may cause the group to redefine acceptable drinking practices. There is an expectation within groups that members adhere, to a degree (or at least be seen to adhere/pretend to adhere, whether or not this is actually the case; see Chapter 5), to the group's specific rules and regulations regarding their alcohol consumption.

Young people often spoke about learning how to 'handle your drink'. Drinking sessions can be thought of as opportunities for teenagers to practise their new-found hobby, which requires time and effort. Much of this revolved around developing tolerance and the ability to consume an acceptable volume of alcohol. The teenage drinkers wanted to be regarded by their friends as competent alcohol consumers who were not going to lose control and get too drunk. Groups undertake an important balancing act between the need to demonstrate drinking competency within the group and the need to do so undetected by parents. The phrase 'getting just enough drunk' captures the fine line that many young drinkers walk:

I suppose I was still going to get drunk but not wasted. Just like to get drunk ... it was always just drinking to get to a certain stage of being drunk and that you knew you were drunk (09106).

This requires consumption of just the correct amount of alcohol to (a) satisfy their peer group's expectations (consistent with the group's useable culture), (b) achieve the desired drinking purpose (for example, having a good laugh or chatting up members of the opposite sex) and (c) avoid their parents' attempts at surveillance and control over their drinking practices. Achieving this level of drunkenness (explored in more detail in Chapter 4) is aided by the established group norms about the what, when and where of drinking sessions. Both in this sample and in other studies (e.g. Østergaard, 2009) teenage regular drinkers displayed considerable knowledge about the different effects of different drinks (e.g. the speed and nature of intoxication) and how they could adjust their drinking habits to accommodate the varying effects.

What to drink

Different alcoholic beverages are ascribed considerable symbolic meaning by young people depending on their gender, status and drinking ability. Amongst teenagers, certain alcoholic drinks are considered relatively age specific. It is common that, by a certain age, teenagers need to demonstrate that they have acquired an acceptable level of drinking ability through the type of alcohol they consume. For example, large bottles of cheap cider are often considered acceptable only when starting out. By age 16/17, cider is no longer considered an appropriate beverage, unless the drinker is a relative novice. For the few who still enjoy the taste of cider, up-market versions are much more acceptable (e.g. Magners and ice).

Among our sample, premixed spirit drinks and brand extensions (e.g. Bacardi Breezer, Smirnoff Ice and WKD) were common starter drinks for new drinkers, as they are easy to consume, relatively strong for the novice drinker and in some cases were provided in the home by parents:

... we went through a phase of you know drinking [ehm] alcopops and stuff 'cos they were easy to drink like Smirnoff Ice and stuff, and [eh] WKDs just 'cos they were easy to drink and then you would just like knock it back (10152).

Novice drinkers often looked to more experienced consumers to guide their purchases, particularly in new settings or situations:

[when drinking in a club for the first time] ... I didn't really know, like, what to say I should get. xxxxx said 'Do you want something?' and I was like 'I don't know what to get' [sotto voce]. Yeah, she was good, she just, 'I'll get you something' (08087).

The relatively high cost of premixed drinks meant that most young people quickly expanded their drinking repertoire to include cheaper beverages, such as cider and beer, as they became more regular drinkers. Boys in particular saw the shift to beer or cider as a requirement of growing up.

Gender distinctions in drinking patterns were observed both between and within groups. Amongst girls, beer tended to be considered a boys' drink, as were large bottles of cider (three litres). Instead, many of the girls were initially drawn to premixed vodka-based drinks before progressing to white or rosé wine and spirits. Girls who did drink cider (i.e. group 5, The Smart Rebels) commented that they disliked the taste, but they bought it because it was cheap and lasted all night. In this mixed drinking group, the girls would tend to mix cider with blackcurrant cordial and share out large bottles amongst themselves. The girls in this group shared alcohol only amongst themselves and never with the boys. In contrast, the boys tended to purchase and drink large bottles of cider on their own, which reflects their greater focus on displaying their prowess at consuming an acceptable volume of alcohol.

In the case of low-level drinkers, such as the members of group 8 (The Excluded), the choice of drink was made predominantly on grounds of taste. They tended to opt for sweet, highly palatable brands, avoiding anything with an alcohol taste. They did not report any willingness to attempt to acquire the taste for more challenging drinks:

Really girly things like Bacardi Breezers [laughs], white wine spritzers, just really silly, girly, sugary drinks because they're the only ones that taste good (51041).

It is worth noting that, while not being particularly adventurous in the choice of drinks, members of this group were fully aware of the range of products available to them and the symbolic and gender meanings attached to specific brands. Their consumption decisions were not forced upon them as a result of a lack of alcohol brand awareness.

Many of the groups drew a clear distinction between premixed vodka brands and neat vodka. One girl who regularly drank WKD (a vodka-based brand) stated that she avoided vodka, as she thought it was too strong, didn't like the taste and wanted to avoid a 'vodka day' (29036). Premixed bottles were considered less 'hardcore' (29036) than buying and drinking neat vodka. However, within a number of the groups (e.g. group 4, The Emoters) some of the young people did progress to drinking spirits, including whisky and vodka, which they would mix with a range of different soft drinks:

[re switch to vodka] [laughs] Easier! Vodka gets you drunk more so (31051).

At each stage in the general progression across different beverage types, there was a period of 'weaning' as the young people familiarised themselves with the new drink (or new quantity). Many of the boys made the transition from cider (which was considered easy to drink) to beer only after they 'acquired the taste'. For a period of time they would purchase and drink both, before eventually dropping cider in favour of lager.

In addition to the desire to progress to drinking higher status beverages, young people would also make standard consumer choices similar to those of older drinkers. On occasions young people would switch drinks because they had grown tired of or bored with a product. Likewise, many young people would return to drinks they consumed earlier in their drinking careers because of easy availability (parents providing premixed spirit drinks at a family party), low cost (when they did not have enough money for their usual purchase), convenience (bottles of premixed spirits are easy to carry and hold when dancing in a club and considered less likely to be 'spiked') and advertisement and rebranding (premium ciders).

Young teenagers are not impervious to marketing and brand penetration. For example, when The Footie Lads (group 7) first started drinking they knew exactly what they wanted, 'Hooch' (15003), commenting on the visibility of the product even at a relatively young age. The cost of the product is also factored into decisions around what to buy. Young drinkers often go for brands on special offer at local off-licences. When the offers change, brand preference often follows:

Hooch ... just everyone was talking about it and it was flashed up in the window, like something like 5 Hooch for 4 pound. It was all you ever seen in them days, bottles of it lying about ... that's what influenced me (15003).

Although a progression in beverage choice can be observed, the transition is relatively fluid. Young people move back and forth between different drink types as relatively sophisticated consumers making considered choices based on cost, strength, volume and taste.

How much to buy/drink

Both beverage choice and volume were often used to display drinking competence. For young people this is about being good at something and feeling a sense of achievement in their alcohol consumption. Teenage drinking was not necessarily about becoming an adult or mimicking grown-ups, but, rather, it was about being able to do something (i.e. consume a particular drink or volume of drink) that other teenagers could not. Drinking can provide a sense of mastery and, for some young people, the greater the risk, the greater the sense of achievement. Different groups also tend to emphasise different aspects of achievement, but this is bounded by their age:

I think a lot of it was after getting a half-bottle every weekend for the past year ... you didn't really feel a third of half-bottle any more and you're like 'OK we'll get a bigger bottle' so then 750 [ml] or whatever bottle and [ehm] ... stuck to like one of those between three of us plus mixers (29018),

... [name 1] could handle her drink now, [name 2] could have quite a lot and then [name 3] would've been about the same as about me, and then [name 4] is quite a big girl so she was able just to sit and drink all night – she would drink any of them [boys] under the table (09036).

It's all like a mind thing like, 'look at how much I can drink! I'm brilliant!' [laughs] (10101).

In addition to a progression in the type of drink consumed (alcopops to cheap cider to beer and spirits), there was also an important and recognised progression in the size of the container (denoting volume consumed) amongst many of the social groups. Examples of this include the transition from small to large bottles of premixed spirit drinks and small to large bottles of cider. Typically, the teenagers had limited opportunity to purchase alcohol when out drinking. As a result, they tended to purchase all their alcohol for the evening at the one time. Therefore, when the opportunity to purchase arose they had to make decisions regarding the amount of alcohol to be purchased for the whole drinking session. This would involve balancing the cost of the various brands, the strength of the drinks and the volume they came in (i.e. size of the bottles or cans/number of bottles or cans) against their spending money. Although The Peacocks (group 1), for example, appeared always to have money for alcohol, when funds were short decisions would be made to opt for cheaper brands; however, even these choices were limited by their notions of acceptable drinks:

and there was also that – that sorta thing of if they were drinking WKD and stuff and the two of us were standing with a bottle of Jack Daniels so probably some of the girls think 'oh what a fecking

idiot, what are them two doing with a bottle of Jack Daniels?' the way we seen it we would drink Jack Daniels 'oh we're better than youse!' (10101).

... for about 3 or 4 months ... all we drank was fucking alcopops! 'til it actually happened ... one day I went 'what the fuck are we buying this shit for?' (10101).

Buying alcohol in particular volumes/containers was seen by the teenagers as a statement of drinking expertise, a way of saying that they were able to consume a particular benchmark quantity denoted by the size of the container purchased. The girls in group 5 (The Smart Rebels), for example, made the standard transition from drinking mainly premixed vodka brands to purchasing quarter-bottles of vodka (17.5 cl). They then progressed to purchasing a ten-glass bottle (70 cl) between three of them, with two of the girls drinking a quarter each and a boy drinking the remaining half. As their tolerance increased, the young people needed to purchase larger amounts of alcohol. Buying a single large bottle is more cost-effective than the purchase of several smaller bottles. Furthermore, sharing a large bottle among friends was considered more of a shared ritual. This was much more common amongst girls than boys. In addition, the size of the bottle held symbolic significance for these young people. It distinguished them from younger drinkers, who could risk only smaller bottles, and marked their achievement of a certain degree of drinking competence:

... [With] the bigger bottles ... you didn't have to buy four little ones ... handier to hold if you went out [laughs] it's great fun! (29036).

The Footie Lads (group 7) were less concerned with the volume of alcohol consumed. Although they preferred to purchase their beer in cases (12 cans), they would frequently not drink all that they had bought, hiding the remaining cans in bushes and hedges. To an extent, other commitments, particularly Saturday football, were considered more important than the amount of alcohol they could consume. They recognised the conflict between their group's priorities, and it was their alcohol consumption that was compromised to maximise footballing performance.

When to drink

The groups quickly developed routines about when they would drink. In the case of most of the groups, alcohol consumption was initially limited to one evening a weekend. Group 1 (The Peacocks), one of the heavier drinking groups, did drink on both Fridays and Saturdays if they had the money. If not, they would drink only on the Saturday. By age 15 they were drinking every weekend. The typical routine involved meeting early (say around 7 pm), buying their alcohol as soon as possible thereafter and staying out as late as possible (usually to around 11/11.30 pm). By age 16 they had left school and started to work; the additional finances that this supplied enabled them to buy more alcohol. This allowed them to go to night-clubs every other Saturday, which they could not previously have afforded, even if they had been able to gain access to the venue. Over time, most groups progressed to drinking on both weekend nights.

The timing and duration of teenage drinking is heavily influenced by the implicit contract drawn up between the individual teenagers and their parent(s) (see Chapter 5). Thus, if a group had curfews, they would start drinking earlier than if they didn't, so as to create sufficient time to drink, get drunk and sober up again:

... like our theory obviously, not a very good theory but [ehm] like sorta the earlier you start drinking, the earlier you get drunk, the earlier you can try to sober up before you have to go home ... It was never paced or anything throughout the night. It was always just drink it quick ... and then that's it really (09001).

The Footie Lads (group 7) were relatively infrequent drinkers compared with most other drinking groups, initially drinking only once a month before progressing to around once a fortnight. As reported above, their commitment to other social goals (football) constrained their alcohol consumption. In their early teenage years, football was very much a family affair, with parents regularly attending matches. Although it was easy to sneak past their parents at night when they had been drinking, the boys were fearful of being discovered at the match the next morning.

Where to drink (drinking territories)

Knowing where to drink is more than simply having somewhere to just 'be' and drink, away from the scrutiny of adults. Although much of the initial exposure to alcohol occurred in the home (e.g. stolen drinks, limited consumption with parental approval), the move to more regular drinking, even when young teenagers, was associated with local parks, waste ground or quiet street corners. Space is important to young people (Leonard, 2006). Young people, particularly boys, need to own or dominate the location where they drink. If they are no longer the dominant group on their patch, they tend to find somewhere else to drink. This was particularly important amongst our male groups such as The Peacocks (group 1), who expressed their desire to maintain their macho status and exert dominance over other young people of a similar age. Those groups that frequently drank in public areas professed a sense of ownership of that space. It was their private social territory, free from the interference of adults and older young people.

Group 7 (The Footie Lads) used to drink in a local park. Although another (slightly older) group also used the park for drinking, there was no contact between the two groups. The park was locked at night but the group had its own way in and an escape route if the police, council workers or residents were around: 'you would just run for it and through the hedges into the residential area and then you just dispersed and you were there' (15003).

Another group (group 2, The Three Musketeers) was actually forced away from its regular drinking spot by a crowd of older teenagers. This was a gradual and subtle takeover and change of ownership of the location. The group was not forced away by physical aggression, but the presence of the older boys diminished the fun the younger group had when drinking, to the point at which they decided to move on and find another private outdoor space. Unlike The Peacocks (group 1), who admired a group of older drinkers and occasionally tried to impress them, this group was intimidated. Being watched by the older drinkers appears to have stopped the younger teenagers achieving their drinking goal of having fun, a laugh and a bit of 'craic'. They preferred to drink with young people their own age.

The impact of older drinkers on idioculture can be observed again when young people make the transition to drinking in local bars and pubs. When drinking alongside adult drinkers (i.e. drinkers of their parents' generation) the young people reported reducing their general consumption. This was mainly to avoid drawing undue attention to themselves so as not to get into trouble in an environment in which extreme intoxication was less tolerated.

As the young people grew older there was a gradual transition from drinking outdoors to drinking indoors. Although the move indoors was almost universal, the specific route did vary across the groups. As teenagers get older, outdoor street drinking begins to lose its appeal. Some talked about how hanging around on the street became increasingly boring. Street drinking provides little by way of comfort and shelter and may limit the social activities that the group can engage in:

The summer after fifth year we finished with the park ... I think it's once I got into Lower Sixth I'd wised up, I didn't want to be going standing round the streets, I don't want to be standing drinking any more as well (15003).

When teenagers are young, when the main focus of drinking is the pleasure of intoxication and concealment is a primary need, drinking in local parks or other outdoor locations may be sufficient.

However, when drinking becomes more of an aid to other social interactions, having fun, telling stories or meeting other girls or boys, such locations do not work so well and are less desirable.

For some, girls in particular, the next drinking stage often occurred at friends' houses when parents were away or, on occasions, with the tacit agreement of parents or older siblings. Sometimes this would involve drinking with their group when just hanging out together or watching a DVD; at other times drinking took place at larger teenage house parties. In the case of some of the groups, larger house parties became more frequent as they grew older, many of which were held with parental permission and support. In one party described, the young people had the run of the garden and extended kitchen, but were under strict instructions that no-one was permitted in the house.

Two groups of boys had access to a hut/shed on waste ground, where they continued to drink for a period before they were able to drink in pubs. The young people provided a number of reasons for this transition. As hinted at above, the young people wanted greater comfort (the hut, for example, had a heater and sofa and greater safety). It also satisfied some parental concerns, as they knew where their children were at night.

Sometimes drinking indoors provided access to a wider social crowd in the form of a house party or 'get-togethers' (10101). In some cases, drinking indoors, be it at a friend's house or other location, appears to have provided some reassurance to parents that they at least knew where the young people were hanging out and with whom. One dad used to go down to the hut belonging to group 2 (The Three Musketeers) and 'call time'. Leonard (2006, p. 232) refers to this as the 'privatisation' of what is typically public teenage behaviour. Parents accept that their children will drink alcohol before the legal age limit and attempt to retain a degree of control over the drinking situation – what and how much is drunk, where they are drinking and with whom. However, drinking was still concealed in the hut as most parents of group members were unaware that their children were drinking there.

Eventually young drinkers make the transition to drinking in licensed premises. Mostly these are specific youth-orientated venues catering for the young adult market. In some cases more traditional pubs were favoured by the boys in our sample. Group 1 (The Peacocks) appeared to largely reject 'trendy' clubs and bars, preferring to drink in more traditional working-class pubs. Likewise, group 7 (The Footie Lads) tended to favour such venues. However, this had more to do with their chances of being served and the likelihood of encountering someone who knew their parents.

Those groups that reported a later age at onset (around 16/17) tended to drink exclusively in licensed premises, avoiding the need to drink on the street. For example, the middle-class girls in group 6 (The Late Starters) looked down on street drinking with some disdain:

We were talking in work one day about most people have done their carry out on the street corner and I was, 'I'm so glad I've never done that ... it just doesn't appeal to me ... I don't think it's nice' (08068).

... they just sat about the streets and got drunk where as if it had have been me and my group of friends we would have either tried to get out somewhere or like got to someone's house (08122).

For these girls, on-street drinking was associated with lower-class kids on housing estates, whereas, in reality, drinking location is probably more a product of age at onset. By age 17, few of the young people would have contemplated drinking on the street. By that stage, most were aware of venues which would admit and serve them.

When considering where teenagers in our sample chose to drink, two particular locations stand out as worthy of special consideration. The first of these is the front lawn of Belfast City Hall. The second is a purpose-built entertainment centre, located on the edge of Belfast city centre.

City Hall

Belfast City Hall is the Victorian civic headquarters of Belfast City Council. The Baroque Revival building, located in the centre of Belfast, has extensive grounds to the front and sides. Although the lawns may be used by tourists and lunching office workers during the day, at weekends and evenings it is occupied by large groups of teenagers and young adults. Most of the young people congregating here belong to a number of identifiable youth subcultures, mainly Goths, emos or punks. In the conflict between young people and adults over the control of public space (see Ward, 1978), this use of the City Hall as a drinking and socialising space by large numbers of teenagers (on some occasions in excess of a hundred) must rank as a major annexation of a public location:

... all these feckin' eejits – you'd a big pile of Goths here and a big pile of punks and all these fucking meddlers and you'd [get] old guys who were about 25 (10101).

For such a public location to be used as a drinking spot it must offer young drinkers a high degree of anonymity, possibly because of the sheer number of young people who congregate there. If the risks of being spotted drinking were too high, young teenagers would not use it. Although there was high probability that family members or other adults who would recognise them could pass by, the teenagers were unlikely to be noticed within the large crowd. The subcultural Goth uniform, worn by many of the City Hall teenagers, may also add a further level of camouflage to the illicit consumption.

The City Hall also appears to be a relatively neutral location in that both Catholic and Protestant young people reported socialising and drinking there, something that is relatively uncommon in the divided city of Belfast (Leonard, 2006). It is situated away from existing contested residential areas and may provide a safe space where youth cultural identities are more important and may override traditional religious identities. The young people who congregate here do not wear the traditional community identifiers often seen in other areas of Belfast, for example football shirts.

Given its city centre location, the City Hall provided a convenient meeting place for some groups. In addition to drinking, some of the girls would indulge themselves in 'doing consumption', such as browsing or hanging out as customers in nearby shops and cafes (particularly if it was raining) (Kato, 2009, p. 56). By age 16 this location had lost its appeal as a drinking location for many of the young people. By this age they had discovered particular nightclubs that had less than strict door policies. Also, younger people were entering City Hall, suggesting that their time was up and it was time for them to move on, i.e. they had outgrown it:

... when I was friends with xxxxx, her big sister, who was three years older than us, had always been going there, so we saw her doing that and we thought that was normal, and we saw her drinking on a Saturday and, like, when we sort of came into it she sort of came out of it, so we kind of went in as she was leaving it and she, like, would have introduced us to quite a lot of people and then sort of we came out of it, like, a couple of years later, out of that phase (29064).

Entertainment complex

The second specific location considered here is a large entertainment complex consisting of a sizeable enclosed courtyard surrounded by a range of facilities including pubs, restaurants, a bowling alley, a science museum, a multiscreen cinema and six nightclubs. It is a semipublic leisure mall, very similar in design to a shopping centre. Although sited within walking distance of the city centre, it is somewhat removed from the traditional drinking venues located within the city. From about age 16, many of the girls would routinely go drinking at this complex. Often parents would provide transport to and from the location. Such an enclosed venue situated away from the main city centre and other pubs and clubs, and guarded by internal security, is seen as a safe(r) location for young girls to drink than in the city centre bars or clubs. Malls such as this complex can be considered privatised public leisure space (Kato, 2009).

It maintains its own security team backed up by surveillance closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras. In addition, the various bars and clubs housed within the complex maintain their own private security. As the young people make the transition to independent adult drinking, the complex provides a secure supervised staging post, acceptable to many parents. Given the 'gated' nature of the environment, with its high level of security and the family focus of many of the individual attractions (the cinema, bowling hall and science museum), gratuitous displays of drunkenness are uncommon. Even amongst those parents with a stricter attitude towards alcohol, there was a greater willingness to permit their underage daughters to attend clubs here than in other city venues. The attraction for the parents is the increased safety afforded by the location; for the girls, it was the friendly door policies and young, trendy crowd. This has been noted in other purpose-built entertainment centres (Measham and Brain, 2005):

... because, like, the [complex] there's the police and all [private bar security] ...so there's never really fights in them places, while in different areas there would be more ... so I think maybe you'd be safer ... (31051).

4 Managing intoxication

Introduction

Consuming alcohol as a teenager is a tricky business and requires the mastery of a range of complex skills. Young people must know how to gain access to alcohol. The younger the teenager is, the harder this is to achieve. Often, alcohol must be purchased through a third party. Once purchased, the young people must be able to consume an acceptable amount, at an acceptable pace, whilst achieving the required level of intoxication to facilitate the drinking goals for the session (see previous chapter for discussion of drinking purpose and goals). The level of intoxication achieved must also take account of the social situation in which drinking occurs; in particular, it must not result in the young person violating the expectations of his or her parent(s), which vary with age. Failure to get drunk enough (an unlikely outcome) may waste a valuable social opportunity. The consequences of drinking too much (a more likely occurrence) include a loss of face within the group, getting into trouble, looking a fool in front of other young people and other negative consequences, such as feeling/being ill.

Developing expertise

... yeah well it depends ... if you were just a wee bit tipsy and you liked it, you know, you would try and drink the same amount to get to that stage again [sniffs] and then if you had drank, well, too much you were like 'right I'm not drinking for months!' [laughs] (09140)

Teenagers strive to develop drinking expertise, the ability to control their level of intoxication. Expertise results from practice and the accumulation of knowledge about what to drink, how to drink, where to drink and when to drink (the drinking etiquette outlined in the previous chapter). Young people acknowledge a progression in their own drinking skills and in the skills of others, whereby they gain a greater ability to manage the loss of control arising from alcohol consumption (see Measham and Brain, 2005, for a detailed discussion of this concept).

It must be noted that, although the majority of young people appear to develop a high degree of self-control over their alcohol consumption (Fergusson *et al.*, 1995; K. M. Jackson *et al.*, 2000; Chassin *et al.*, 2002; Sher *et al.*, 2004; Percy and Iwaniec, 2007, 2008), the process is complicated by a number of factors. First, the intoxicating effects of alcohol may be different in teenagers and adults. Animal studies (as studies of this nature using adolescents would be considered unethical) suggest that juveniles may be more sensitive to the social facilitation effects of ethanol and less susceptible to its sedative effects than adults (Spear, 2002; Varlinskaya and Spear, 2004). As a result, the perceived benefits of getting drunk may be greater for teenagers than for adults. Second, other teenagers appear to be more tolerant of a peer's overindulgence than would be the case within a similar group of adults. Although uncontrolled intoxication is a cause of social stigma at all ages, the degree of stigma is considerably lower among teenage and young adult drinkers than that perceived by adult drinkers. Comparing the likely reaction to a teenager getting drunk and being sick in front of his or peers with the reaction to an adult getting drunk and being sick in front of work colleagues gives an indication of the stronger social boundaries that operate around adult social drinking. As adults we are expected to have greater self-control of our

consumption. Third, a lower level of tolerance to alcohol amongst younger teenagers when first starting to drink alcohol means that they can become intoxicated on relatively small amounts of alcohol. This reduces the margin of error between controlled and miscontrolled intoxication. Lower tolerance also reduces the likelihood of hangovers, as the absolute volume of ethanol consumed is limited. This removes another external motivator for moderate drinking. And, finally, recent advances in cognitive neuroscience have shown that the ability to make the types of complex decisions surrounding the controlled use of mood-altering substances, which adult alcohol consumers do routinely, is something that emerges only amongst older teenagers (Chambers *et al.*, 2003; Casey *et al.*, 2008a,b; Steinberg, 2008). The maturation of executive cognitive functioning such as the regulation of behaviour, impulse control, goal-directed planning and consequential thinking occurs in late adolescence. Younger teenagers, as a result, are poorer decision makers where substances such as alcohol are concerned.

When starting out, young people lack any real experience of drinking alcohol and have limited knowledge or skills about what to drink, how to drink and how to develop secure and regular access to alcohol. To address this they often turn to other individuals or knowledgeable peers (mentors), who have more drinking experience, for information regarding what and how to drink. These mentors are often older friends or siblings, who provide both snippets of advice and information on accessing and drinking alcohol. In some cases, the individual will purchase alcohol on behalf of the young people until they are old enough to buy it themselves. Among our sample, the influence of more knowledgeable drinkers was observed not only at the initiation of consumption, but throughout the teenagers' drinking careers:

... one night I was out and I was sitting with three bottles of WKD, two in my Tesco's bag and one in my hand, and I'd see one of the guys with a bottle of White Lightning and I would be like 'What's that you're drinking?'. 'Oh this is Frosty Jacks, you should taste it, it's lovely'. And I'd be 'What is it?', 'Cider?' and 'Is it nice?'. 'Yeah there's blackcurrant in it, taste it. And then I would take a sip and I would be 'oh', something'd click and I'd be right next week getting the cider and that's me and that would be me sorted really, that would have been me from there onwards ... it tastes great with blackcurrant, it gets you drunk and that's what you want for £3.00, and we were all like 'oh happy days' (09106).

By assimilating the information and drinking practices of others, young people acquire drinking knowledge that allows them to practise and develop their own alcohol consumption. Such practice allows young people to hone, shape and craft a drinking style that suits them and the friendship group. Individual members actively contribute to the development of the group's drinking culture. Consuming alcohol is generally perceived by teenagers as a skill that improves with age (e.g. changing physiology) and practice (i.e. experience). As young people accumulate drinking knowledge, they progress from the novice (not knowing how or what to drink) towards the expert drinker (being able to choose drinks on the basis of accumulated knowledge, changing tastes, etc.).

The accumulation of drinking expertise is not a linear process. Rather, it is punctuated with major transitions, during which previous knowledge is of limited use and young people have to rapidly acquire new skills, awareness and drinking patterns. For example, in the transition from drinking on the streets/people's houses or drinking in pubs and clubs individuals lack the experience to know fully what to do. Being underage, they are unsure of where to go, where they can get it and what to do once they gain access. Consequently, they turn to whichever of their peers have experience of drinking in pubs for this information. By interacting with their knowledgeable peers, they are able to glean information (i.e. where to go and how best to gain access). Older siblings are also a highly valuable source of insider information on bars and clubs. In addition, older siblings often lend their ID to younger siblings, permitting them to gain access to bars and clubs. Young people with access to such ID permits are able to access licensed premises at a younger age than friends who have to wait until they look old enough to pass the scrutiny of door staff. Such drinking knowledge is disseminated through teenage social networks such as the peer

groups studied here. Generally speaking, when a group in our study found a pub/club that they were able to get into they usually stayed there for a period of time, acclimatising to their new drinking environment and developing the skills and behaviours required to fit in.

The development of self-regulation of intoxication occurs over time, mainly through trial and error (Decorte, 2001; Percy, 2008). Young people recognise that they undergo a period of training during which they practise their drinking skills. At the core of this developing expertise is the individual's awareness of their own *limit* – the level of alcohol required to achieve an appropriate level of intoxication. Through repeated drinking experiences young people develop an appreciation of the effects of different patterns of drinking (type, volume and pacing). For example, group 5 (The Smart Rebels) talked extensively about the importance of knowing their limits:

... you knew your limits from there ... some nights you went overboard but most of the time it was, right, 'I'm here, I've had enough and I'm getting tired and I want to go home soon' (09106).

... I knew my limits like after that night. I was like, 'no I'll just go on'. I think that's what made me wise up as well ... (09036).

... everybody knew the right amount, you know ... (09001).

Shared experiences of regulated and poorly regulated intoxication add to the accumulated drinking knowledge within the group. In some cases, episodes of poor regulation may cause a shift in the drinking culture of the group as an attempt to minimise the chance of recurrence of the situation. Many of the young people did recognise the learning opportunities involved in these incidents:

I think them experiences are brilliant, like, but you do learn, know what I mean? As you get older you learn like ... if they didn't happen ... worse would probably happen to you like (15048).

However, the shifts in drinking culture that may follow from these incidents do not necessarily reduce the overall risk of harm to the young people. Instead, they may simply minimise the chance of a negative outcome (e.g. getting caught by parents – see Chapter 6 for further discussion of this issue). Often, our young people interpreted these incidents as one-off events that resulted from some extraordinary circumstances outside their control rather than seeing them as an individual mistake or inability to control their drinking. For example, the members of group 7 (The Footie Lads) all reported having had their drinks spiked and feared repeat occurrences of this. As a result, they now buy only bottled beers in clubs and pubs (so that they can put their thumbs over the top) or leave their drink with a trusted friend. It is unlikely that their drinks had been spiked by drugs (which is very rare) or alcohol (which can be easily detected by taste), so their reason for changing their drinking practices is faulty (see Burgess *et al.*, 2009, for a discussion of heightened fears surrounding drink spiking). It is much more likely that any untoward incident was the result of simple overconsumption. However, their chosen strategy (switching to more expensive products [bottled larger] sold in smaller containers) is likely to reduce the odds of overshooting their desired level of intoxication, albeit not by the method they anticipated (preventing their drinks being spiked).

As young people progress from novice through competent to expert alcohol consumers, their drinking patterns change, as do the techniques they employ to manage their level of drunkenness (e.g. talking themselves out of drinking more or telling themselves that they are not that drunk, removing themselves from the situation, eating food). Young people become better at judging their state of intoxication and altering their drinking behaviours accordingly. Changes in drinking skills also lead to changes in drinking culture to accommodate the newly accumulating skills and knowledge. Individuals monitor their progression from novice to expert drinker (though not in any systematic way) by comparing their drinking

ability with that of other core members of their group. Group members were able to highlight differences in drinking ability among group members. They were aware of each individual's different level of ability or skill. Being able to consume alcohol at levels appropriate to the group indicates a certain level of achievement. Comparisons are also made across social groups, allowing a friendship group to distinguish themselves from other peer groups who drink either more or less than them.

Managing consumption

Teenagers' attempts to manage consumption should not be thought of as strategies or techniques employed to minimise or reduce overall alcohol consumption. Instead, these are the drinking rituals and customs that are employed by groups to achieve their overall drinking purpose and desired level of intoxication. This usually means focusing on the amount of alcohol consumed, the pace at which consumption occurs and the specific level of intoxication that has to be achieved.

Levels of intoxication

The majority of teenage drinking is centred on intoxication. The various functions for which alcohol is employed by teenagers, such as displaying status and identity, providing the social lubricant when talking to other teenagers, removing inhibitions and generating some 'craic' (see previous chapter), all require some degree of intoxication. When not under adult supervision, few teenagers engage in moderate drinking; rather they strive for intoxication. As noted amongst young adults, intoxication is rarely unbounded, and young people have a desired level of drunkenness that they try to achieve (Measham and Brain, 2005). In this study the desired level of intoxication was a function of the background drinking culture of the group and the social situation in which consumption occurred (including environmental factors such as level of parental supervision, time available for consumption, purchasing power, access to alcohol, etc.). It is possible to distinguish between the relatively stable group drinking style and accepted levels of intoxication (higher for heavy drinking groups and lighter for more socially focused groups) and the specific context in which individual and group drinking decisions are taken by young people when out drinking at night. Situations differ in the behavioural constraints which they impose on young drinkers. If the group has little money or time available for drinking their consumption is likely to be reduced in comparison with other drinking opportunities. However, young people's reactions to external constraints are heavily influenced by their background drinking culture.

Even amongst the heavy-drinking groups it was recognised that group members could drink too much, achieving an inappropriate level of intoxication. Young people rarely wanted to completely lose control through alcohol:

I think everybody knew then from experience how much it took to get you to, like, the drunkenness that you enjoy. Obviously you don't really enjoy being so drunk that you can't remember things. I think we all sorta got to the stage where we knew how much to drink to sorta have a good time but not be lying in a heap and being sick sorta thing (09001).

... drunk in a happy way, like, I wouldn't have gone out to get, like, pissed. I would go out to, like, get drunk. (15084).

This is not to say that the young people did not talk about desiring extreme levels of intoxication, such as wanting to get 'absolutely hammered' (09036) or 'absolutely drunk as a skunk' (15048); however, there was no evidence of young people deliberately getting too drunk.

With a focus on having a good time, and on 'pulling' girls (when older), it was important to The Three Musketeers (group 2) that they did not get too drunk. They would drink just enough to get drunk

while trying to sustain some wit, humour and self-control. They believed that they were aware of their limits and could stick to them. Indeed, even though the BYDS self-report quantitative alcohol data gathered over five consecutive years suggests that the group were quite heavy drinkers, one member insisted he had never been drunk and that the group 'don't do drunk!' (10142). Here *drunk* was considered to be an extreme level of intoxication associated with losing control. In keeping with this norm, the pacing of consumption was left to the individual. It was up to each individual to determine his own limits (sufficiently intoxicated to 'loosen up' and have a good time, but not to lose control completely).

This group's (group 2 – The Three Musketeers) interest in girls provided a natural brake on their overall level of consumption, but tended to increase the pace at which they drank. Going out became less about just getting very drunk and more about quickly getting drunk just enough so as to be able to 'pull a girl' (10199). The youngest member of this group recounted how he was the last one to realise that he didn't need to get really drunk to have a bit of 'craic' and 'banter'. As he got older he learned that there were more things he could be doing when out drinking, such as chatting up girls. Going out with friends was no longer about who could drink the most but about who could pull the best-looking girl. As they grew older, pulling girls also became of increasing importance to The Peacocks (group 1). Alcohol played an important part in this activity, as they needed to get 'pissed' to loosen up and to show girls that they could drink. Being drunk made it easier to talk to girls who, at that time, terrified them. One member said that they needed to drink to get the courage to go and talk to a good-looking girl. Alcohol also provided a convenient escape route if their attempt to chat up a girl failed; if they did anything stupid they could always blame it on being drunk. They saw no reason to be sober when talking to girls as the girls they were trying to impress were always more intoxicated than them.

With some of the girls, interest in particular boys would also engender a greater degree of control over their consumption. Here, the fear was that being seen to be too drunk would be offputting. Being drunk in front of male friends was permitted where there was no potential for or interest in romance (see next chapter for further discussion of alcohol and dating).

Among members of The Peacocks, in contrast, the appropriate level of intoxication within the group was construed in terms of an individual's ability to 'handle it' (10101). There was a need amongst The Peacocks to be seen to be able to consume large amounts of alcohol but retain a certain degree of control over their state of intoxication, or at least their outward appearance and behaviour while drinking. The motivations for their control of their level of intoxication were not concerns about personal safety, health, security and transport; rather they were based on perceptions of acceptable working-class adult drinking culture, whereby men can hold their drink. Control over intoxication amongst these male teenage drinkers was exercised not by reducing consumption but rather by boosting tolerance. Not only did the group expect high tolerance levels, but members also had to 'keep up' (10152) with the fast pace of consumption during drinking sessions. This highly valued set of skills (tolerance and pacing) was accompanied by a slightly competitive element to consumption. This sometimes spilled over into drinking games and bets on the 'last man standing' (10152) to see who could consume the most drinks.

Competing priorities

For some groups, additional competing priorities/goals appear to conflict with high levels of alcohol intoxication. For example, some groups had a focus on playing sports (groups 2 and 7), academic study (groups 6 and 8) or religion (group 8). In general, these groups moderated their desired level of intoxication to reduce conflict with their other competing priorities, to the extent that one group (group 8) did not desire to get drunk at all. For these groups, alcohol was not the sole focus of their socialising and leisure activities. They engaged in some social activities that did not require the consumption of alcohol. In the majority of these groups, these competing priorities did not result in zero alcohol consumption, but rather the young people seemed to be able to balance their longer term goals and ambitions.

Amount purchased

In contrast to most adult drinking, a common method used by teenagers to manage their intoxication was to ensure that they purchased the 'right' amount of alcohol at the start of the evening and to stick to consuming only that amount. To an extent, this is a product of the lack of access that young people have to alcohol. They are generally unwilling and unable to repeat purchase. In a number of groups there was a tradition of not sharing alcohol. As a result, the initial amount purchased provided a natural ceiling on their drinking:

... you'd be out of drink, you'd have five or six beers or a quarter-bottle of vodka down you and that was your limit, you bought that that night and that was you and once you [had] drunk that that was you finished (09106).

There was girls there [outside the group] who would've just started drinking any drink after that, but all of us [the group] were kind of, 'no I've had mine, we can't'. We weren't greedy with it, like I said earlier, we weren't really 'well I want yours now I've drunk it or I'm gonna start drinking my friends' because I've finished mine'. None of us were ever really like that at all (09036).

The weakness of this method of managing consumption is that it is highly visible to other members of the peer group. Everyone in the group is aware of the amount of alcohol that other members are planning to consume. In those groups where there is a premium on the amount of alcohol consumed, this strategy may entice young people to purchase more than they should drink and to be constantly trying to increase the amount purchased. Likewise, such a control strategy is relatively unresponsive to changes in the drinking environment. If young people feel that they are getting drunk too quickly, it may be harder for them to adjust the pace of drinking as they have a set amount of alcohol to consume in a set amount of time.

When drinking in bars, one of the groups, The Footie Lads (group 7), which comprised relatively modest drinkers, reported avoiding getting into 'round' drinking, as this tended to increase the amount of alcohol consumed. When drinking in a round, individuals would be expected to purchase drinks for everyone in the company. They would then have to wait until this was reciprocated by everyone who was involved in the first round. As a result, the number of drinks consumed tended to be dictated by the size of the crowd in the round. To retain individual control over the volume of alcohol consumed, members of this group tended to buy their own drinks. This ensured that there was little pressure to drink at a certain pace with this friendship group:

... we never bought rounds – if I felt I'd had enough I would go, like, 'that's enough', like, or if I didn't and I felt like 'I'm still not drunk', I would go and buy more, that's just the sort of way, that's the way I work like (15048).

Discrepancies

To ensure consensus with group drinking purpose, some group members would look for discrepancies between their drinking and that of others within the group. If observed, members can take steps to resolve discrepancies so that their own (or others') behaviour is consistent with that of the group. This may mean increasing consumption (upward regulation) or decreasing consumption (downward regulation). Strategies used to adjust drinking behaviour, be it in an upward or downward direction, can be at the deep level (e.g. drinking water, eating something, drinking faster, drinking stronger/weaker alcohol), where they are actively trying to influence their state of drunkenness, or at the surface level, where individuals merely try to conceal their state of drunkenness or amount of alcohol consumed (e.g. chewing

gum, eating strong-flavoured crisps to disguise the smell of alcohol, pretending to be sober/drunk, giving their drink to someone else). The level of monitoring varied between groups. Among those groups in which alcohol played more of a socialising function, drinking decisions tended to be left to individual group members. Here, monitoring in relation to upward regulation was relatively lower, but monitoring in relation to downward regulation was relatively higher. In those groups committed to heavier drinking or hedonistic purposes, the reverse was generally observed. In this case, the group was concerned with getting everyone up to the required state of intoxication.

Some of the girls adopted a strategy whereby they measured their drinking relative to one other member of the group whom they judged to drink at the same level as them. If they drank the same amount at the same pace as the other girl, they would not get too drunk. Knowledge of the other group members' drinking styles allowed them to identify this benchmark individual against whom they could pace their own drinking. It was less likely that two group members would both misjudge their drinking and overconsume:

If I had the same as xxxxx, and xxxxx was OK then it was we knew we were gonna be fine 'cos she was always worse (29018).

Other groups did not consciously use any specific strategy, relying instead on intuition or gut instinct; in other words an X factor:

I wouldn't really know, 'oh, I've had these many drinks', I'd just, like, you just know in yourself when you're starting to get too drunk then you stop (31075).

There is the problem of a time lag (between consumption and intoxication), which can account for some of the unintended consequences of these regulation strategies. For example, many of the young people mentioned drinking faster, in an attempt to catch up with other members of the group, but, because of the time lag between consuming alcohol and it taking effect, they would end up becoming extremely drunk quite quickly and either passing out or being sick:

... 15, 20 minutes later the air hits you and you're like whoa, I've drunk too much ... and there's no going back from that, so you just have to face it out and hopefully you'll get home and everything'll be alright in the morning really (09106).

Downward regulation

Individual attempts at slowing or stopping drinking were often triggered only by noticing a particular effect of alcohol. Young people recognised that they had had enough to drink when they started to wobble on their feet or slur their speech. These effects acted as signposts that they had achieved a particular level of intoxication. Once they occurred, young people could judge the amount of alcohol they could consume in the time remaining to them. The one problem with such a strategy is that it requires alcohol effects to be noticed and sensible decisions to be taken by young people who may already be quite intoxicated. Many of the groups interviewed recognised that mistakes often occurred when they simply continued to drink even after a particular signpost had occurred. The second problem is that, at the stage when young people detect the symptoms of intoxication, they can still have a stomach full of alcohol waiting to pass into the bloodstream. The metabolism of the additional alcohol can lead to them overshooting their desired level of intoxication. This has been observed in computer-based simulations (Moxnes and Jensen, 2009).

In groups with a greater focus on intoxication as a drinking purpose (as opposed to a more social purpose), the level of downward regulation tended to be lower. When it did occur it was usually just gentle

mocking of the individual who had drunk too much. It also tended to happen too late, that is when group members had already consumed copious amounts of alcohol:

... it would be all innocent and, like, banter. It would be never anything personal or like 'look at the state of that dickhead or look at [name]' ... like they would always be looking after him and still having a bit of banter with him and just raking him about or whoever was drunkest, but you would, still, it would be in the back of your head that like we're only having a laugh here, but we need to make sure he gets home and all and same sort of thing like (09106).

By and large, members of group 5 (The Smart Rebels), for example, would try to reduce their consumption only after they had overstepped the mark by drinking beyond what was an acceptable state of drunkenness for the situation. This is consistent with their overall hedonistic drinking style, which focused on the pleasurable effects of intoxication. Rather than adjusting the pace of consumption to avoid mistakes, they tended to employ methods to correct mistakes after they occurred. At a basic level, particularly when dealing with parents or other adults, they would simply try to disguise the fact that they were too drunk, by trying to act sober or eating mints to cover the smell of alcohol:

We'd obviously [be] chewing gum and mints and everything ... it's the other way round, you get drunk and you're trying 'oh, I'm not drunk' [laughs] (09140).

Other groups, for example group 7 (The Footie Lads), mentioned drinking water to slow down their consumption and to try and sober up. To a degree drinking water also acted as a substitute activity for drinking alcohol.

More serious situations often required the direct intervention of one of the less drunken members of the group. This could involve stopping their friend from drinking and trying to sober them up a little. But, again, these interventions tended to occur when the individual was already very drunk and needed the help and support of others:

... if anyone had ever been so sick you were, like, takin' them home it would've been, like, 'don't drink that much again' (29064).

Sometimes, I had to carry xxxxx home, sometimes I'm sure she had to carry me home sometimes ... just some nights you woulda got a wee bit drunker than other times and kinda just made sure you got home OK (31075).

... tried to give him something to eat, like tried to give him bread and stuff be like 'that'll sober him up' kind of thing 'make him eat bread and stuff'... we always like always went and got a pint of water and ... just drank the water for the last hour or something like that there (09036).

Upward regulation

In some drinking situations group members would become aware that they were not drinking at the acceptable level. The easiest method used to resolve this discrepancy, one that did not require them to actually change their drinking pattern, was simply to pretend to be drunker than they actually were. This is a common strategy used by novice drinkers, who can struggle to maintain control of appropriate volumes of alcohol. It is also used when young drinkers do not like what they have to drink or do not want to drink any more. On these occasions, rather than admitting this to your friends, it is more important to fit in with the group and pretend you are still drinking rather than upsetting the balance:

... whenever you were younger you probably would act, act on it a bit more, you know you'd maybe say you were drunker than you actually were. I would've probably played up on it a bit ... ehm, I probably did, you know, if I thought, ehm, 'I'm getting sick of this' or 'I don't like the taste of it' (09140).

In those groups that emphasised high levels of intoxication and consumption (groups 1 and 5) certain group members would actively encourage an increase in the pace of drinking within the group. This could involve offering drinks, joking or starting drinking games:

... start shouting 'drink, drink, drink!' and you had to neck ... it or something ... really childish and daft (09036).

On one occasion the desire to keep up with the group led a member of The Peacocks (group 1), after arriving late, to drink a half-bottle of Jack Daniels in around five minutes. When recounting the incident he expressed surprise at how quickly the alcohol affected him. All he remembers is everything going blurry and then waking up at his granddad's front door. He had the shakes the next day and he stopped drinking after that for the best part of a year and wouldn't leave the house for two months as he felt rotten and embarrassed.

When drinking in mixed-sex groups, girls noticed that there was a tendency for boys to encourage other boys to drink more but not so with the girls. It was widely acknowledged within these groups that the boys would drink more than the girls. Similarly, the boys tended to drink to higher levels of intoxication than the girls. There are not the same group expectations on the girls regarding the amount they had to drink. Generally, amongst young people the social stigma attached to losing control of alcohol consumption is greater for girls than for boys (see Griffin *et al.*, 2009; Østergaard, 2009):

I think wee girls are the worst ... some wee girls I find disgusting, see when a wee girl's blocked? I'm put off completely. I wouldn't care how gorgeous she's looking, see, I just go 'no, don't', I hate a wee girl drunk ... no respect for themselves at all – you know what I mean? (15048).

Although they clearly stated that there was no overt peer pressure within the group, members of the heavier drinking groups mentioned that they did feel a need to keep up with the pace of drinking set by their friends. In most cases, individuals would simply notice they were lagging behind and would try to catch up with everyone else in the group:

... my friend, she really drinks really fast, like say you bought two drinks and she bought two drinks and she would maybe have her second bottle drunk when you've only started yours and you'd try and catch up with her but then after a while I'd just say just let her go because there's no point (31036).

Group members reported that there was no real need to encourage drinking. Everyone had signed up to the group's drinking idiosyncrasy. However, on the occasion that someone had decided against drinking, it would definitely be questioned by the group. Persuasion would often be used to coax the member into drinking:

... we'd be all 'you haven't drunk anything, come on get drinking', but it would never be like do it! [laughs] if someone says 'awh, I can't drink another', but you'd be like 'Why haven't you drunk anything yet?' or 'Oh, you're, you're not drinking yet, why not?' (29064).

In some situations watching some of their group struggling to keep up with the pace of drinking was part of the fun when out with your group:

I suppose it was great entertainment value when you see a few other people getting a wee bit too drunk. When you see them sort of slurring their words, it can be quite amusing to see it and at that age if you see that happening, you're pissing yourself and rolling about on the ground laughing. That was definitely an encouragement as well (09106).

The groups were also conscious of their increasing tolerance to alcohol as they continued to drink. Respondents mentioned their intoxication levelling out as they became more accustomed to the effects of a certain amount of alcohol. This necessitated a frequent assessment of the level of intoxication delivered by the usual amount of alcohol consumed and a subsequent increase in volume if the desired effect was no longer achieved. Young drinkers can be seen to be regularly tinkering with the amount of alcohol purchased and consumed when out drinking. The following quote gives a valuable snapshot into this regular adjustment of drinking levels to ensure that the desired levels of intoxication are achieved and incidents of overintoxication are avoided:

I just remember that night being in a state [overconsumption] and then, you know what I mean, like, I'd be alright the next day or something, and next time I'd say 'right, I'll not drink as much as I did like' [downward adjustment to avoid repetition of previous overshoot], and that sort of levelled things out. And then after a few weeks I sort of drink a bit more than I usually would just 'cos I wasn't getting drunk [upward adjustment to account for increased tolerance] (15048).

Changing context and losing control

When drinking, young people need to balance their internal appetite to get drunk, the group's drinking culture and the situational constraints which limit their ability to indulge their impulses. All alcohol consumption is bounded. With young adults, internal concerns about safety, security and health constrain drinking behaviour (Measham and Brain, 2005). Amongst teenagers these factors are more likely to be externally imposed restrictions on the opportunities to drink, such as the time available for consumption, parental supervision and monitoring, weather and accessible finance.

Having to go home early, for example, could produce quite diverse responses from young people depending on their peer group. Members of heavy-drinking groups often increased their consumption early in the night so they could be sober by the time they needed to go home. If the time available for drinking was reduced by parents, they would shorten the interval from starting to drink to achieving a suitable level of intoxication, leaving sufficient time to sober up. Unless completely unavoidable, their response was not to stay away from alcohol, but rather to alter their pattern of drinking to meet the expectations of both their group (get drunk) and their parents (be sober). For others less dedicated to hedonistic drinking, having to go home early would completely curtail any attempts at drinking.

Other external factors could both inhibit and promote alcohol consumption. By age 15 many of the young people had managed to secure part-time employment. As these jobs often required evening and weekend work, opportunities for meeting their friends and drinking were subsequently reduced. In general, however, increased disposable income was associated with increased consumption (see McCrystal *et al.*, 2007a). The additional income from part-time jobs often permitted young people to make the transition to drinking in pubs and clubs, where there is often a cover charge and drinks are more expensive.

When young people are taken away from their normal drinking idioculture – for example when they start drinking with a different group or at a different location – cultural norms about types of drinks consumed, pacing and control, etc., no longer seem to apply. Many of the techniques and strategies

teenagers develop to regulate their consumption seem to be domain specific. Slight alterations of the local drinking context can result in the young people struggling to achieve their desired level of intoxication as their techniques no longer work as well as they may have in the past.

Many of the stories the young people told about overshooting their target related to occasions when they were consuming alcohol somewhere new. A number of recounted incidents of getting very drunk and passing out clustered around transitions in the locations of consumption, for example moving from drinking on the street to drinking mainly in house parties, or in pubs and clubs.

Techniques that can be used to limit consumption when drinking out on the street, such as purchasing a set number of drinks, may not work so well when the young person is drinking at a house party. If, as is often the case at such parties, a communal pool of alcoholic drinks has been provided by the hosts (in some cases this may be liberally minded parents), teenagers are able to access further alcohol after they have drunk what they brought with them. If they are out drinking on the street, the opportunity to top up their supply of drinks may be limited, as the chance of getting served after they have been drinking or finding someone to buy them more alcohol late at night is likely to be low. At a house party where free drinks are provided, this is not a problem. The number of drinks that they can consume in an evening is no longer finite. In addition, the available drinks may be different from their normal type, for example high-strength spirits rather than beer or cider, and ones of which they have limited experience of consuming. In situations such as this, young people are more vulnerable to overshooting their desired level of intoxication. Many of the skills they have developed to control their consumption may be highly situation specific, in that they work effectively only in certain drinking contexts. If the context changes they may be ill-equipped to deal with the new drinking environment. To overcome this, young people may have to develop a new range of skills and strategies to deal with the changing local drinking environment if they are to avoid any unwanted outcomes. These individual-level changes must then be incorporated within the broader idioculture of the group.

Summer holidays abroad provide a number of examples of this idioculture breakdown. For example, the girls in group 6 (The Late Starters) went on holiday without parents when aged around 17 and, as one of the girls relates:

I think the real turning point for getting really drunk was when we went away on holiday in sixth year (08068).

This experience of independence and autonomy was viewed as an important coming of age. Holidaying without parents established their credentials as a group and that they could rely on each other and be safe. Although major shifts may have occurred in relation to their alcohol consumption, elements of group culture remained constant, in particular their willingness to look after each other. Miscreants within the group were quickly reined in and supervised to avoid danger; one girl wandered off with a boy on holiday and was quickly called back into line.

On holidays young people often increase the frequency of their drinking from once or twice a week to every day. They make the most of the opportunities provided. Girls in particular have easy access to alcohol as many of the bars and clubs in holiday resorts provide them with complimentary drinks as they compete for their custom, which in turn is used by the bar to attract young male drinkers. One group of girls (group 3 – The Preppy Girls) commented on the number of free drinks they were given on holiday. 'Head fucks' (29064) was the name given to multiple shots provided by bar staff, which they were encouraged to down in one. Even when they purchased drinks, they were aware that they were usually given much more alcohol than they had paid for.

And on holiday drinking is no longer confined to the evenings. Teenagers often drink also during the day. Holiday activities for older teenagers involve doing new things, meeting new people and often include alcohol. Again, drinking in new locations, at different times of the day, with new people, and drinking different beverages from normal, presented in larger measures, all increase the risk of the young

people failing to self-regulate their alcohol consumption. Many of the travel companies catering for young adult holiday-makers provide organised party activities for young drinkers, further contributing to extreme levels of consumption (Hesse *et al.*, 2008). Surveys of young holiday-makers consistently show increased alcohol and drug use when abroad, particularly at international party locations such as the Balearic Islands (Bellis *et al.*, 2000; Tutenges and Hesse, 2008). This is also associated with increased sexual risk-taking (Bellis *et al.*, 2004). Many of the constraints on older teenage drinking that apply at home, such as having to be back by a certain time and relatively sober, may be removed when drinking on holiday. This may permit the teenagers to increase their desired level of intoxication. In addition, many of the control strategies used to achieve a specific level of intoxication, even if increased from that considered acceptable at home, may not be as efficient in an international night-life resort designed specifically to cater for hedonistic drug and alcohol consumption. Simply put, the temptations placed in front of young people travelling abroad may be too strong for many to resist:

I think it was just the fact that I knew I didn't have to go in and see mum and dad, you were on holiday, you know what I mean. No-one knew you so ... you didn't have to care about what age you were 'cos no-one was ID-ing you and all and there was no police about or, you know what I mean like, you know yourself when you go on holiday you're just like 'ah, this is great, I don't have to get up for work or I don't have to do anything'. We just we'd finished our GCSEs or got our results of our GCSEs or something like that. I don't know what age I was, 16 or 17, and it was just you'd no limits on holiday, whereas when you come back here there's always something or even if you have, like, your reputation if you got that drunk, everyone, you'd always be remembered for it (09036).

In some circumstances a change in the local context of drinking may temporarily aid the regulation of alcohol consumption. A small number of respondents reported that their first experiences of drinking in licensed premises was not in a pub targeted at specific social groups, such as young people or students, but rather in a traditional local pub with a mixed clientele (see Pratten, 2003, for a discussion of the variety of different public houses that populate UK towns and cities). The circumstance of drinking in a location with older adult drinkers was often accompanied by a greater degree of regulation over their consumption than occurred in previous locations (e.g. on the street). Teenagers tended to reduce their desired level of intoxication out of fear that any display of drunkenness would result in them getting into trouble with the bar staff or other drinkers who may know their parents. The age range of the drinkers appears to provide an additional external constraint on their drinking behaviour owing to a perceived lack of tolerance for extreme levels of intoxication. This contrasts sharply with venues that are targeted at a narrow age range of the drinking population. When young people are drinking in a group of similarly aged individuals, be it on the street as young teenagers or in a nightclub as a young adult, their consumption appears to be higher, as is the general tolerance for extreme intoxication amongst drinkers at the venue. However, as Pratten (2003) notes, it is only those establishments that target specific age bands, such as student bars or pubs serving food for adults with children, that are thriving within the current market, while traditional local public houses are in decline. Young drinkers have fewer opportunities to consume alcohol alongside other adult drinkers. Rather they tend to be corralled into specialised establishments that stimulate and perpetuate their hedonistic desires.

5 Relationships

Introduction

Teenage drinking is a social activity rarely done outside a group setting. Young people invariably drink with their friends. As a result, many decisions taken around alcohol consumption are negotiated, to a considerable extent, within the peer group and are bounded by the transient nature of the group and its membership. The internal peer dynamics, both within and between groups, play an important role in shaping alcohol consumption and overall drinking culture.

Commitment

Each of the groups developed a recognisable idioculture surrounding its alcohol use, such that their consumption could be considered a collective endeavour rather than a series of isolated individual actions. Individual drinking patterns can be considered the product of the long-term social interactions of group members. However, there were differences between groups in group members' level of commitment to the group's alcohol idioculture, in general, and, in particular, to the drinking goals expected of each individual group member. As a result, the level of 'esprit de corps' in relation to the drinking goal varied between groups. Within some groups, for example, members actively worked together (e.g. consuming copious amounts of alcohol) to achieve the common drinking goal (e.g. getting drunk). In the case of other groups, although members agreed with the overall purpose of drinking, individuals' commitment to this shared/collective goal varied at different times. For example, in some groups it would be acceptable for an individual member not to get as drunk as everyone else, as long as this did not affect the other group members. In these instances, individuals would manage this process accordingly. For example, they would put on a façade (e.g. pretending to be somewhat drunk when actually quite sober).

Differences between groups in terms of expected commitment tended to reflect differences in general drinking purpose between groups and also variations in a group's drinking goal for a particular session (this is situation dependent). For some groups the shared sense of purpose was to drink to get very drunk, whereas for others it may have been to be sociable or have fun and a bit of banter or 'craic'. Group 1 defined themselves as the 'heavy drinkers', consuming beer and whisky while everyone else was drinking Smirnoff Ice. This group had high levels of commitment around consumption, making it difficult for newcomers to be socialised into the group unless they also showed the same level of commitment. In The Peacocks, for example, there was little opportunity for individual members to deviate from the standard drinking pattern. There were high levels of monitoring of each other's drinking levels, and various rituals were invoked to ensure that members conformed to the accepted level of consumption and the appropriate pace of drinking:

You'd be able to watch how fast you're drinking and 'cos there's another person there and 'cos you're both taking exactly the same amount of cider (10101).

... like you would 'What are you on, your third? 'I'm still on my first' and then you're like, oh, shit, I'm still on my first and then you're like trying to drink faster so you're always looking at the person

who was drinking the quickest ... or sometimes it's someone in the group you'd go, shit, xxxxx is on his fifth if you know what I mean (10152).

Although other groups also monitored each other's consumption it was not to the same extent:

... it was more sort of 'Have you finished your glass of wine? You can top it up if you want', sort of thing (29018).

I used to just be the one that was always drunk but I wouldn't have made, like, a complete fool of myself drunk, you know what I mean? I would've kinda, like, realised that I was gonna be the one that was drunk first, so, you know, I used to sip it until I started noticing people around me getting a bit and then I used to be, like, ah, that's alright ... 'cos I, I knew, I didn't want to be the one who was in a corner at half-eight (09036).

There was a tendency for the drinking culture of female-only groups to be influenced by the needs of the group to remain safe and supported when consuming alcohol, driven by the recognition that alcohol consumption increases individual vulnerability and that safety can be maintained if the group sticks together and members look out for each other. In group 6 (The Late Starters) in particular, commitment to a single drinking goal was secondary to commitment to individual group members. Group members rarely consumed alcohol outside the confines of this close circle of friends. The group provided each member with a degree of protection and trust, in relation to both avoiding fights, danger or self-inflicted harm and also comfort and camaraderie. One group member, who considers herself the more experienced member in relation to alcohol, describes her role: 'I would usually always be the one who didn't get as drunk as everyone else and I would always make sure like that they were OK, like we always went together and went home together' (08126). This was confirmed by other members: 'I always feel like she'll always look after me, and she always does' (08122). The focus on safety around alcohol meant that there was no pressure to buy drinks or drink at the same pace as other group members. They would all go up to the bar together, and anyone who wanted a drink would feel free to buy one. No group member would have been left to approach a bar on her own, even if she were the only one planning to purchase a drink. They went out as a group, stayed as a group and went home as a group. There was an implicit understanding that they stayed with their friends when out drinking. They also reported adhering to the 'golden rule' that no-one is left to go home alone or indeed left alone in a taxi as the last drop-off.

An individual teenager's commitment to a group's alcohol idioculture is determined by three factors. First, their position in the group (i.e. status hierarchy) influences their level of commitment. Individuals who assume a leadership role within the group play an active part in directing and setting its drinking etiquette and are thus more likely to be committed to the group's alcohol idioculture. Second, the level of influence an individual can exert over other members (i.e. the balance of power) influences his or her commitment to the drinking idioculture. Individuals with greater influence/authority over others are more likely to take charge of the group's behaviour, including the way in which they consume alcohol. Finally, the extent to which an individual moves in and out of the group (i.e. mobility) will affect his or her commitment in that individuals who drift in and out of the group are less likely to be committed to its alcohol idioculture.

Peer influence and status

Social influence is defined here as group members' ability to exert control over their social environment and the people who occupy it (i.e. their group and others within the wider social crowd). When this subject was discussed in the interviews, it was apparent that most teenagers believed that all group members are relatively equal. This indicates that all group members have some power, that the status hierarchy within the group is subtle and that the balance of power within the groups is relatively similar.

However, quite often it was possible to identify one member of the group who tended to take charge of the group, directing and shaping the behaviour of everyone else. This dominant or core member tended to be the social thread that links and keeps the group together and the person to whom all other members gravitate. Influential group members, such as these, tend to have stronger bonds or attachments with the other group members than the other members do with each other (Giordano, 2003). It is through this strong attachment that a greater level of power is conferred on one group member.

In some cases these influential group members offered a specific service to the group or played a specific role during certain times when together. For example, during the early drinking experiences of group 5 (The Smart Rebels), the need for information was important in attributing influence. The girls gravitated to one member who had prior drinking experience, as she knew what and how to drink. She helped other group members overcome initial concerns about getting drunk and begin to develop drinking competency. In The Peacocks (group 1) members gravitated to the one young person who was able to procure the alcohol. This ability granted this group member considerable power and influence over the group. Without him the group would have had considerably more difficulty accessing alcohol. He was able to influence when the group drank and what they drank through his alcohol purchases on behalf of the group. Initially, such a dominant member (or leader) plays an important role in instructing members on appropriate behaviours and can play a prominent role in shaping future drinking culture.

In some groups the dominant member tends to be the person who 'steps up to the mark', making the decisions for the group as and when necessary. This tends to be the most extrovert or social member, who decides for the group or at least helps the other members to reach a consensus as to where they should go and what they should do. However, as individual members become more experienced drinkers, the leader takes a less active role, allowing the members to run the group themselves (as in group 3, The Preppy Girls):

... I wouldn't have been telling people where to go but, you know, once people said somewhere, like we're doing this ... I would go and I'd ring people up and be, like, come here tonight or try to have people round to my house before we go out because a lot of people couldn't agree. You know, just, I'll just make a decision and just do it whereas other people would be like 'oh, oh, oh, oh' (29036).

xxxxx would be someone that ... a lot people would have a lot of respect for and she would have taken the lead quite often (29064).

It is important to note that social influence does not equate to group members using their power to dominate other members (although this does occur at times), but rather that influential group members use their power to ensure that the group is interdependent. In other words, influence is used to get everyone working together and ensure that they behave and function as a good drinking group. For example, the aim of teaching your friends how to consume alcohol and get away with it is not to gain power over them but rather to ensure that all members know how to consume alcohol in a way that benefits the group, by meeting the group's objective or solidifying their identity. Influence is used by the young people for the good of the whole group rather than the benefit of a few. Underlying this is the notion of 'shared risk' amongst underage drinkers. Some groups knew that if one member was discovered drinking by his or her parents, the risk to other group members was also increased as parents could speak with each other about the incident. To an extent, such a process is likely to reinforce the willingness of group members to look after, influence and limit the behaviour of other group members if that behaviour increases the likelihood of the group as a whole getting into trouble.

The traditional view of peer influence is that of a negative risk mechanism increasing the likelihood of young people engaging in risky alcohol or drug use (for evidence of this see the various prevention programmes that attempt to teach resistance to peer pressure, including Hansen *et al.*, 1988; Hansen and

Graham, 1991; Godbold and Pfau, 2000). Viewing social influence within teenage drinking groups does not negate this position, but it does show that from the perspective of the young people it is an accepted positive social process. Gifting social influence to certain group member(s) at particular times allows the group to be more successful in achieving its drinking goals. Social influence or pressure appears to be a normal conventional group dynamic through which peer groups negotiate and develop their idioculture and their shared drinking action. But social influence is not always pro-alcohol. In academically orientated groups, for example, influential group members may be instrumental in restricting alcohol consumption within the group to the weekends on the grounds that drinking on a school night may interfere with other group (academic) goals (e.g. The Preppy Girls).

The level of influence that a member maintains within a group is contingent on his or her status or position within the group. As Fine (1979) has argued, the evolution of group idioculture occurs in ways that tend to support the existing power relationship and status hierarchy within the group. As we found in this study, higher status individuals have more power to shape the development of drinking idioculture over time. There is a level of reciprocity between influence and status, with status determining influence and influence used to bolster status within the group. Thus, those individuals with specialist knowledge (e.g. who know how to get drunk) or skills (e.g. are able to purchase alcohol) are awarded higher status and greater influence.

Particularly amongst some of the male groups, status was determined and maintained through displays of specific behaviours. Within groups such as The Peacocks, members had to show that they were capable of holding their own when drinking as a group. Status was conferred on group members who displayed greater degrees of competency over controlled intoxication. There was a level of competition amongst group members to show who could drink the most while not losing control. Group members are stratified according to drinking merit. One member, in particular, couldn't drink as much as the others and as a result was the entertainment for the group. As such, he was always consigned to the periphery of the group, although other factors were also at play in determining his status (e.g. distance from the group's main social patch). Young people on the periphery of the group tend to have the lowest status and influence within the group, and when socialising with the group are more submissive in relation to drinking culture. However, these individuals also tend to have other friends that they socialise with, leading them to drift in and out of the group and thereby reinforcing their role as the slight social outcast.

[Talking about a part-time member of their group] ... we did it on purpose and just because he was blocked and just do everything on him to torture him, just 'cos it was fun to do, 'cos he tortured us at school, 'cos he was bigger than us and stuff, so we'd get him pissed and then this was our comeback. But it was all, it was all fun and games, so friendly as such, you know, he never cracked up, well, he did a wee bit so. Never, never really to the point of where he'd fall out with you. That's what we did on him, we did that on everybody ... he was a bit of a loner, he lived in the country and I was friendly with him [swallows], but the other two were, like, he's a fucking weirdo! But then the more and more he became friends, he, he was always still classed as my friend [i.e. not a full member of the group and friends with other group members]. If anything happened to him [when out drinking as a group] I had to go get him (10101).

Displays of status and reputation

Once part of a group, members are motivated to view the group in a positive light, to create a positive identity and to distinguish themselves from other groups. Initially, alcohol differentiates young drinkers from their non-drinking peers, giving attention and kudos:

you're sorta wanting ... the attention that you get when you drink like 'awh, really, I can't believe that this is the first time you're drinking' and 'do you like it?' ... like a positive sort of thing (09001).

... it's just like kinda a cool, grown-up thing to do (29064).

The Peacocks (group 1) wanted to be regarded as the big heavy drinkers, and this reputation was something that the group fostered amongst other local young people. They wanted to be known for being hard drinkers, a bit 'nuts' (10101) and 'great craic' (10101). Bragging about the amount of alcohol each could and did drink was one method of maintaining the image. This masculine reputation was most evident when females were present in the social setting. In this case, The Peacocks would perform displays of heavy drinking to impress the girls: 'look at how much I can drink!' (10101). They had to demonstrate to girls that they could handle their drink, that they were not eejits getting drunk on 'three beers' (10101). This meant that they had to drink all the alcohol they had purchased while not getting too drunk, even though, as one member acknowledges, they were still just kids. They consumed strong liquor (e.g. Jack Daniels) to be 'hard'. It was a drink that the girls' dads couldn't even drink, but they could. They thought they were better than the girls, who were drinking WKD.

Displays were not limited to local girls, but were also undertaken to fit in with older young people who were also drinking. They would try and hang around older young people on the street (four or more years older), who they usually looked up to as real drinkers. They attempted to appropriate the reputation of these older kids by association and contact. Drinking to be 'brilliant' (10152) and to fit in with older people who would normally look down at them was a common narrative amongst this group. Generating and promoting a reputation even extended to when one of the boys went off on holiday with his cousin and a couple of other friends. There the barmen labelled them the 'Jaegermeister boys' (10152) because of their ability to drink four shots of Jaegermeister every ten minutes in a local bar.

In the case of other groups, status and image derived not from drinking but from other activities, including sporting achievements:

... there were groups in school who were really, like, 'awh, we drink on week nights and stuff' and it's like, OK, but, ehm, our group was quite sensible really 'cos a lot of us were quite sporty and that kind of thing. So it was, yeah, most of us were sort of, like, didn't need to get completely hammered every weekend because, you know, if you don't know your friends well enough to not drink with them and still have a good time then it's a bit odd. It was nice just being able to sit about and not have to drink and still be able to speak to people or be yourself (29018).

Dating

Alcohol played its traditional role in helping young people chat up other girls and boys. Alcohol was often used by the young teenagers as a way of overcoming shyness or as a back-up excuse if their attempts to chat someone up failed:

... wee girls do come over drunk and all, they sorta use it as an excuse, like ... I think they're scared to come up to you sober and say the things they'd say to you drunk ... but sort of pretend they're drunk to get across in case you go 'no' or something. So they can say 'I was drunk last night, I don't really know what I was doing', you know, kinda lying like ... It's a new trick in the book like (15048).

However, one surprising finding was the relationship between underage drinking and dating. When actually dating, teenagers often avoided (or reduced) their drinking. Dating was undertaken not within a

social group, but in couples. In contrast, alcohol consumption was rarely undertaken outside the teenage friendship group.

When they were younger, the girls in group 5 (The Smart Rebels) differed in the extent to which they had close interactions with boys. Some of the girls had boyfriends, whereas others would kiss boys but not actually become involved in a relationship with them. Within this group, early dating exclusively occurred without alcohol. The young couples would go to the cinema or on walks alone. If they wanted to drink, they would get drunk with the rest of the group. Drinking was not something they did as a couple, but remained a whole-group activity that integrated and bonded the group as a unit.

The Late Starters (group 6) mostly restricted drinking to female-only company: 'I just had my group of friends so when I went out it wasn't to go out with a group of guys, you know what I mean, 'cos we went out as girls already' (08068). Alcohol was not seen as a possible route to 'pull' or get a boyfriend; in fact, it was considered to be quite the opposite:

There's another group that I've never been drunk in front of ... I think it might be the fact that I'd fancy one of them (08087).

Getting drunk in the company of groups of boys, whether these were friends of their siblings or work colleagues, was permitted provided there was no potential for romance, and the relationship was instead one of fraternal supervision. One girl remembers a holiday abroad and meeting up with a group of male friends from home and how they looked after the girls because 'we all had a bad habit of attracting really sleazy guys' (08087).

The girls reported that they tended to drink more when drinking with male friends, owing to the higher pace of consumption dictated by the boys and also the boys' willingness to buy them drinks (misplaced gallantry), resulting in them having more money to spend on alcohol. However, romantic relationships with boys were not centred on alcohol. Similarly, the girls' boyfriends tended not to drink to excess in front of them:

But I think I've only ever seen him drunk once, and I've known him for over a year. I think it's just because I'm not out with him as much. I have had a drunken phone call once in a while, but he wouldn't drink that much. His friends would have birthday parties and they would all get drunk then (08087).

Members of the mixed-gender group The Smart Rebels (group 5) occasionally formed romantic relationships. However, drinking remained a group activity and getting drunk was not something undertaken by couples: 'We'd never, just two of us, ever got drunk' (09036). Rather, as a couple, they would have engaged in non-drinking activities: 'we would've, like, just sat about or had a walk, like walked round together' or

you know our mums and dads would've dropped us to the cinema, you know, that 'cos we started saying you know 'I've got a boyfriend now' so we're like 'oh we're going to the cinema' or used to do wee daft things like that (09036).

In a similar way, the boys in group 1 (The Peacocks) reported reducing their alcohol consumption when they were dating as young teenagers. Drinking as a couple was not something they often engaged in. If they had a girlfriend, as one member commented, they would tone down their drinking so as to make a good impression. The impression they hoped to create was one of being funny and a 'laugh' to be with, and was quite removed from the 'hard man' image. They also displayed a degree of gallantry towards their girlfriend. On those occasions when they did drink with a girlfriend they considered it appropriate for them to buy the girl drinks, and not to get as drunk as when with their male friends, as they had

to look after their girlfriend and make sure that she got home safely. When they broke up with the girl they were dating, they would return to the (all-male) group and continue their alcohol consumption.

The nature of the relationship between alcohol and dating changed for most of the teenagers once they began to drink indoors, at house parties or in clubs and bars. At this stage, alcohol began to play a more prominent role in the relationships between boys and girls than was the case when the young people were socialising on the street. However, heavy drinking was still an activity that was largely undertaken within a social group rather than as a couple.

Moving between groups

Although friendship groups are relatively stable over the short term (i.e. one to two years), changes in group membership do occur (Degirmencioglu *et al.*, 1998). Change can occur at both the individual level and also the group level. Members occasionally move between different groups, and in some cases groups actually come together or separate. Mobility (either individual or group) results in a visible change in social structure; in particular, the group hierarchy and associated influences can shift.

The loss of a member is more common in the case of larger, less structurally cohesive, groups. Such groups tend to contain a greater number of individuals who are on the margins of the group. Such groups also tend to have fewer core members, weaker connections between members and more permeable boundaries allowing flows into and out of the group. For example, one member of The Peacocks (group 1) said that he had his friends, he didn't need to make any more. The Peacocks is a structurally cohesive group with a high level of commitment to a particular social identity and drinking culture. Other groups exist within a much larger network of acquaintances, and members can circulate within this wider social crowd. This provides members with opportunities to try different drinking cultures (different drinks, locations and patterns of consumption), which can provide new knowledge for the group or trigger a change in its drinking style.

One individual (group 5, The Smart Rebels) highlighted how the drinking experience differed when drinking with a different group. She enjoyed drinking with her friends from school when on their own, but she hadn't enjoyed her previous drinking experiences with the older young people who attended her school:

I didn't enjoy it when... it was with older people ... I didn't enjoy it as much when it wasn't as much my decision if you know what I mean ... I enjoyed it more when I was with people of my own age ... I was more drunk as well (09001).

The presence of the older young people altered the group drinking culture for those who did not have a strong social bond with them. As the older young people had higher status, some of the young people within the group felt a loss of control over their drinking etiquette. Likewise, there was a greater reluctance to get really drunk in front of older drinkers and be seen as an incompetent drinker (e.g. The Peacocks).

Cotterell (1996) refers to young people on the margins of a group as social *acquaintances*, young people who are not close friends but who are good fun to hang around with, and at times can be thought of as more closely associated with another social network. These young people also tend to be less committed to group identity. One member of The Peacocks (group 1) was never fully dedicated to the macho drinking culture of the group and, although he occasionally drank with the group, he was never considered a core member. In fact, he also drank with other social groups, moving between social scenes. Young people on the margins of groups tend to be less popular and less well liked than more central members.

Individual mobility (i.e. shift across groups) can sometimes be an attempt by the individual to improve his or her position/status within a group hierarchy. Indeed, one of the girls from group 3 (The

Preppy Girls) who engaged in this process talked about the ‘social politics between girls’ (29064). Alternatively, it can be about trying to become established within a group to which the individual feels he or she belongs – a group which shares his or her ‘esprit de corps’ and fulfils his or her needs for that occasion.

For one individual, the shift towards an alternative group had a significant impact on her drinking, including the location, the types of drinks consumed and the aim of drinking (i.e. to get very drunk):

... when we were at that age I wouldn't have been in as close to her as I am now. I would have been with a girl called [name] and we, and so there's sort of two different kind of groups 'cos they're sort of a group of people probably a bit more alternative and a group of people who were quite popular, if you know what I mean. So it would have been sort of that and [I was in] the alternativey [group] ... we would have hung around City Hall things like that and went through that whole phase and then there was like xxxxx ... and she's always been like in the trendy sort of group (29064).

I do I remember drinking vodka quite clearly, and we would have drunk it straight without any mixer or anything ... to get us drunk quicker ... that was the quickest way to do it [laughs], the easiest way, even though it was horrible (29064).

Shifting between groups can also provide teenagers with new opportunities (such as trying alcohol for the first time or drinking in new venues), but these opportunities may not always be regarded as positive:

... that was the first time I ever, you know, drank but ... I didn't want to do it again after that ... not until ... maybe about 16 (31071).

Indeed, this individual was so ashamed by the episode that she even kept it from her best friend:

... I remember like talking about it [the first time she drank alcohol] maybe later on when we were about 16/17 and I remember saying it then and she was like 'no you never! You never told me!' ... I just never told her I think just because I, I was ashamed ... (31071).

Social exclusion

Although most of the teenage drinkers could be seen to be part of the normative youth culture in their local area, examination of group 8 (The Excluded) suggests that these girls were on the periphery of the school social scene and were excluded by the trendy/sport groups who dominated the culture of the year group. They never became a part of the weekend teenage scene and were aware that they were in the minority and didn't belong to any of these popular groups within school. However, they were very much aware of the popular crowds within the school and the role that alcohol played in their social life:

I think it was just the rugby boys who were the peer group who were the adored ones at school, ehm, they would have gone out quite a lot and have beers and just done that sort of thing and the football guys as well, but then the younger girls in particular just wanted to be noticed, and it was blatantly obvious that that was all they were looking for ... they were the demigods of the school (51041).

One of the girls dated a boy from school, but once he became part of the rugby clique she was no longer considered a suitable girlfriend. The image of her group did not match that of the rugby crowd.

She was aware that she didn't fit with the accepted behaviour of his peer group, particularly in relation to alcohol consumption.

The group commented on how everyone within school was pigeonholed within a particular social status according to the group they belonged to. To an extent, the rigidity of the social structure within the school was something resented by the group. Even though they did not profess any strong desires to consume alcohol, their exclusion from much of the social world outside the school did create feelings of jealousy, curiosity and isolation. By being on the periphery, as a result of their lack of drinking expertise, some members of the group felt that they were missing out on something important. They were largely barred from the normative social world of the older teenagers because of their refusal to get drunk. This social exclusion resulted from both the group's lack of interest in alcohol and also other pupils' reaction to that lack of interest. Alcohol plays such a central role in night-time leisure that many teenagers would not consider it possible that young people may wish to be part of this without drinking:

I think that part of the reason I decided not to go to [a popular nightclub] in upper sixth [end of year party] was because people had this really strong expectation that I wasn't going to be there, and even on the last day I said to myself 'look I'm not going, I've done six years without it and I can do another one'. I knew if I went on that night that it would bring up all these questions and, to be honest, I just didn't want to ruin my day by having all these people asking me all these questions about why I was letting myself down and blah, blah, blah, the Northern Irish perception that Christians don't drink so, ehm, they shouldn't go to the den of sin and that sort of thing, so I just couldn't be bothered. That was the main reason (51041).

I was never really exposed very much to it [to alcohol] because all the places people were going out drinking, I had no interest in going to so no-one was going to offer me it in school obviously so unless I went to the places I wasn't really going to be offered it (51080).

The barrier created by their lack of drinking also extended to socialising within school. So much of the general chit-chat between pupils revolves around their experiences and behaviours when out drinking. Again, this group was excluded:

... not on the drunkenness side, I think what I maybe missed out on was, or felt I was missing out on, was the social interaction, ehm, because of the cliques and because if you, if you weren't up for going to the clubs then you couldn't join in with the banter (51099).

Parents

In most cases the young people in this study were not allowed to drink unsupervised, although many had been allowed to taste alcohol in the presence of their parents when they were younger. On some occasions, when the young people were older, parents would permit the consumption of alcohol in the home. Parents tended to provide boundaries to the young people's leisure time in an attempt to restrict opportunities to consume alcohol. However, given the levels of consumption reported, even when the teenagers were quite young, these practices were rarely successful. The young people were aware of their parents' wishes regarding alcohol consumption. To an extent, there was an implicit contract established between parents and young people.

Whereas parents believe that this contract is non-negotiable, the young people tend to work under the assumption that it is not. This is partly because the young people perceive the obligations to be informal and imprecise and that they are able to push boundaries to test the limit of the contract. The young also people reported numerous examples of mixed signals, for example their parents allowing the teenagers to taste alcohol while in their presence but not with their friends. The most extreme example of

this was one young person's parents supplying the peer group with alcohol without informing or consulting any of the other parents.

The reaction of the majority of the young people to parental attempts to restrict alcohol consumption was a strategy of gradually pushing the boundaries. The young drinkers would consume alcohol against their parents' wishes, while avoiding their parents' attempts at supervision or monitoring of their behaviour. The young people would engage in a subtle balancing act between getting sufficiently drunk to achieve the group drinking goals, including entertainment and maintaining social identity, whilst sobering up before having to get past their watchful parents. In situations when this timing went astray, other group members would sometimes help to create a cover for the young people, so they would not get into trouble. For example, one member of The Preppy Girls (group 3) recounted an incident when she was picked up by her mother after a night out with friends while she was still quite drunk. Propped up in the back seat of the car between friends, she slept on the car journey home, while her friends distracted her mother. Despite parents' best intentions, teenagers who want to drink will, by and large, do so. Even when the parent-child bond was strong, some young people were prepared to drink despite their parents' wishes. The desire to drink and fit in with the drinking ethos of their peer group was more powerful than the wishes and desires of their parents.

The young people were aware that their parents employed a range of strategies to enforce their rules, including curfews, instilling fear through threats and warnings, checking with neighbours and local residents who may have seen the young people when out, monitoring their spending patterns, questioning them when they come home, and contacting their friends and the parents of their friends. The young people also adopted a range of strategies to avoid detection, including looking out for people in the streets, trying not to attract attention, drinking in secluded locations, consuming only small amounts at the beginning, obeying their curfew so as to avoid parental attention, carrying purchased alcohol in different carrier bags (i.e. not the bag provided by the off-licences), drinking in a friend's house, staying over at a friend's house, going straight to bed after coming home, avoiding contact with parents after being out and, finally, and most importantly, never getting so drunk that their parents could easily detect that they had been drinking.

Some of those interviewed managed to drink throughout their teenage years undetected by their parents. However, the majority of the drinkers reported incidents when their alcohol consumption caused conflict at home. Stories of rows, lectures and grounding were recalled. One enterprising mother photographed her daughter while she was being sick as a result of consuming alcohol and repeatedly showed the photograph to her daughter and her friends before they went out for the evening. The typical reaction to being caught by parents was not a cessation or a reduction in consumption, but rather a refinement of the strategies employed to avoid detection. Increases in parental attempts at supervision were matched by teenagers' efforts at managing consumption to ensure concealment of their drinking behaviours. Parental supervision did provide a boundary which contained the levels of teenage intoxication, to a degree. Young people were constrained by the action of parents. However, most saw these limits as a test to pass, getting as drunk as you could while still evading parental attempts at detection. Many of the young people continued to drink under the assumption that their parents would turn a blind eye to their drinking as long as they did not overstep the mark (i.e. as long as they were relatively sober by the time they arrived home). No parental action reported by the young people resulted in a permanent or long-term cessation of or reduction in drinking behaviour. Instead, parents' attempts at altering their teenagers' drinking merely altered their consumption patterns in the short term as the teenagers developed new strategies to avoid conflict with their parents.

As the young people grew older, parents would relax the constraints around alcohol consumption. By 16 years of age, most teenagers' parents acknowledged their children's drinking, and open renegotiation of the contract was undertaken on a regular basis. For example, some young people were permitted to drink on the understanding that their parents knew where they were. In response, the young people

did not relax or curtail their consumption but continued to push against the boundaries as their drinking culture changed and evolved with new drinks, venues and patterns:

... when I was younger they were probably against it, but at 16,17, they didn't mind me having a wee drink as long as I was in the house and wasn't on street corners like and I sort of wasn't heavy drinking, just as long as it was just the odd time (15048).

Although most young people would try and respect these new levels of parental trust, they would still drink at levels beyond what their parents expected. Trust was repaid not by reducing their levels of consumption, but rather by adhering to their parents' requests about where they drank and when they returned home at the end of the evening.

The girls in the group with the lowest levels of consumption mainly grew up in families in which little alcohol was consumed. Their parents, although they did not actually prohibit alcohol consumption, did not hold particularly liberal attitudes towards alcohol. Their parents were never authoritarian; however, for most of this group the low levels of alcohol consumption within their families reinforced their own drinking culture:

... there would be alcohol in the house but they don't drink a lot, I wouldn't consider them to drink a lot (54080).

[talking about drinking at age 18] ... I think they would have been OK as long as I wasn't going out every night to get drunk. I don't think they would have appreciated me coming home drunk but if I only had a few drinks, if I was reasonably responsible about it, I think they would have been OK (51012).

One of the study participants, a Christian, reported that her mum is also a Christian, but her dad works in a pub and does enjoy a drink with his friends and 'a beer in front of the TV' (54041). He sometimes makes fun of her and her friends, encouraging her to drink, but she refuses:

... my dad always made jokes when my friends came round the house about, ehm 'are you going out for a party tonight?' and I would have said 'yes' and he would be like 'drink, drugs, sex and all that jazz?' and I would be like 'no' and he would have said 'why not?' (54041).

In some cases young people modified their drinking behaviour in response to seeing their parents' reactions to older siblings drinking. One girl in group 6 (The Late Starters) was aware of the trouble her brother and sister had got into. Her siblings had always been overt about their drinking behaviour and had frequently been caught out by their parents – her brother was caught vomiting on the stairs and her sister was brought home by the police for underage street drinking. She has a degree of empathy for her siblings:

I know my brother and sister and how they felt about it and you're not doing it because you're trying to rebel or anything else, it's just there's nothing else to do and it's fun. She [her sister] knew it was a really taboo thing and her friends were all doing it and she was like 'oh, I have to do this, I have to sneak about and do this' (08122).

This girl's response was not to avoid alcohol but to make sure that she was never punished, by managing her alcohol consumption to ensure that she was never really drunk and by being open with her parents and disclosing to them what she was planning to do at the weekend:

... I'd go home and say goodnight to mum and dad, just say, 'I'm home', so they never, never suspected anything ... they always thought I was more responsible anyway and I'd never gotten myself into a state ... I would always tell them where I was going and who I was going home with (08122).

6 Experiences of alcohol-related harm

Introduction

This chapter charts the young people's exposure to and experience of harm resulting from alcohol consumption. Given that when young people drink, they do so to some level of intoxication, and a trial and error process underlies the general development of self-control, it is unsurprising that accidents do happen and young people are exposed to risk. Although the vast majority of incidents of alcohol-related harm recounted in the interviews were the result of acute intoxication, some young people did experience some short-term and longer term problems attributable to their drinking habits.

Physical harms

Getting 'plastered' and passing out

Most of the young people recounted stories of losing control and getting so drunk that they passed out. Even those who prided themselves on never completely losing it were mostly able to describe at least one occasion when they had experienced unpleasant effects of drinking or when one or more members of the group had passed out. Frequently these bouts of extreme intoxication were accompanied by a blackout – the failure to remember what had actually happened the night before.

Looking at one group in detail (group 3, The Preppy Girls) provides an insight into the range of incidents in which young drinkers lose control and overshoot their target level of intoxication. One of the girls in this group remembered getting really drunk at a house party when she was aged 14. She was drinking vodka, but when this had run out she started drinking leftover Guinness and parts of other people's cocktails. All she could remember was falling over and hurting herself when jumping on her friend's trampoline and waking up in the kitchen of the house the next morning not knowing really what had happened. She also recounted how, on another occasion, of the eight people who were drinking at a party, she and her friend had been 'particularly bad that day' (29018) and were put in a room by the others and left there. The next morning she felt really ill, but consoled herself that her friend was feeling much worse and had been sick in a bin in the bedroom.

The risk of losing control is a function of drinking experience and skills, drinking purpose (i.e. idioculture) and situational factors. Some members of group 3 (The Preppy Girls) asserted that there was no 'need to get completely hammered every weekend' (29018). Their focus was, rather, on meeting and chatting with friends. Although they were still getting drunk, they rarely 'got like plastered' (29018). As the level of intoxication expected within the group fell, the risk of unbounded intoxication was also reduced. However, if the evening wasn't much fun, the temptation was to get drunk to get through it. Boring or dull events warranted a higher level of drunkenness than other occasions when the group was having more fun together.

Loss of control often occurred when young people were not drinking within the bounds of their normal idioculture, for example if they were drinking with new people or at a new location. One member of group 3 (The Preppy Girls) got very drunk the first time she visited a nightclub, and didn't remember anything of the event. Likewise, many of the stories of extreme intoxication involved drinking something

new or mixing drinks in new combinations. The young people seemed to be most vulnerable to losing control of their intoxication when the familiar social context (and its associated cultural boundaries) changed or was altered. This was when mistakes, and the young people did, on the whole, consider them to be mistakes, were more likely to occur:

... it was always when you overstepped that maybe [you] tried a new thing, that it ended badly [laughs] (09001).

This complete loss of control is not something desired or welcomed by teenagers. It can be a source of embarrassment and humiliation, especially for girls. One young girl (group 3) reported getting really drunk the first time she drank a 'quarter-bottle of vodka', arguing with all her friends, and eventually being sick on one friend's expensive jumper. She reached a level of intoxication and loss of control that she claimed she never wanted to experience ever again. She recounted that her friend 'still talks about it' (29036) some years after the event. The loss of control was put down to it being the first time she had drunk vodka, not eating enough before drinking and being 'a little allergic' (29036) to vodka.

Similar stories were provided by all groups, with the exception of the very low-level drinking group. Even if interviewees reported never being really drunk and passing out (as in group 8, The Excluded), they knew friends or acquaintances who had. The probability of a member of the drinking group getting really drunk and passing out was sufficiently high that it was incorporated into the group's drinking culture. In heavier drinking groups there was an expectation that everyone had a right to be ill for a night. The assumption in these groups was that such consequences go hand in hand with heavy drinking and, even though they are not desired by group members, they are accepted as an unavoidable part of the drinking process. Loss of control is just one of the potential outcomes of alcohol consumption that can happen to anyone when they drink. Some members, however, developed the reputation for losing control. This was never viewed in a positive light by other group members.

The groups developed functional strategies to deal with members who lost control and which complied with the overall drinking culture of the group. At the one extreme were groups such as The Peacocks. In this group, the heavy drinking macho culture led to an 'every man for himself' approach. Those who were unable to handle their drink were on their own. Other group members who stopped to help would fail to achieve their drinking goals. In other groups which did not place so much emphasis on the volume consumed, a less individualistic strategy evolved, in which group members would look out for each other. When someone lost control and drank more than they could handle, other group members would be caring and protective, particularly in relation to parents. This was especially prominent among female teenagers, among whom relationships tended to be more caring. One member of group 3 (The Preppy Girls) had a reputation for getting too drunk, so the other girls would keep 'an eye on her' (29018), making sure she that didn't get into trouble because of her drinking. Amongst these young female drinkers there was a clear recognition of the increased vulnerability of a friend who had passed out or was asleep. For boys, the emphasis was more on the avoidance of detection or serious medical harm.

On occasions, overindulgence in a particular type of drink, for example an exotic spirit or a traditional spirit diluted with odd mixers, would trigger a change in brand preference. Many of the young people avoided particular drinks because of previous negative experiences of drinking them.

Although the young people were often willing to accept that their loss of control (passing out or being physically sick) was due to their consumption of too much alcohol, other rationalisations were often provided during the interviews. Loss of control was often blamed on the change in air temperature when leaving a venue, the fizziness of the drinks consumed, the stature (or lack of) of the drinker, the taste of the drink or the venue.

Risky sexual behaviour

Losing control when drinking can also lead to a number of unintended consequences. Although relatively rare, such incidents were reported. On one occasion, a girl who was drinking particularly heavily had abandoned her friends. Her cousin's girlfriend said to her in the toilets: 'Look at the state of you. Have you been spiked?' (31019). She suspected that the bartender 'was putting extra [vodka] into mine' (31019). She woke the next morning in bed with a strange boy whom she did not know:

... I can't remember exactly what I said to him but we obviously started kissing and I started going with him and ... all I can remember then after that was waking up beside him ... and I was like looking at him and I was, like, my head was absolutely banging and I didn't even know his name and I started to cry and I actually got up and looked out the window and I didn't even know where I was and I was just looking about and like just trying to see if I could remember but I could not remember a thing (31019).

A few weeks later, after her 'one-night stand' (31091), she found out she was pregnant, although she did not carry the child to term: 'I had a miscarriage' (31019). This experience caused her to cut back on drinking vodka, reverting to alcopops to control her consumption:

... when I started going back to the same club I actually didn't drink as much and I started drinking WKD because it didn't get me as drunk as much. It stopped me from drinking so much vodka as well (31019).

For her the experience was very much a wake-up call to change her drinking habits: 'Yeah, it really, really like slapped me in the face so it did, so it was just it was such a bad time' (31019). She no longer wants to be viewed as making 'a whore out of myself', insisting that 'I'm not like that no more' (31019). However, she also stated that if there was a special occasion then her drinking would increase to the extent that 'if it's an event it would be like a binge' (31019).

Hospitalisation

Although extreme intoxication was relatively common, only one interviewee reported going to hospital as a result of alcohol consumption. This scarcity of reporting may reflect both a general low incidence rate of this type of event, given the numbers of teenagers who consume alcohol, and/or a possible unwillingness of respondents to admit such outcomes. In contrast, most of the young people interviewed claimed to have witnessed other teenagers being taken to hospital, or to know someone who had been admitted to a local accident and emergency department to have their 'stomach pumped'. Given the numbers of young people drinking in the grounds outside the City Hall, it is unsurprising that interviewees who drank there recounted seeing ambulances attending drunken teenagers on a regular basis.

Only one group reported chronic medical problems that were partially attributed to their drinking culture. Two members of The Peacocks (group 1) were diagnosed with stomach ulcers. Although one of them attributes his ulcer to stress, the other implicates whisky drinking in his early teenage years as the key causal factor. Contrary to this strongly held belief, however, epidemiological studies suggest that alcohol plays little or no role in the genesis of stomach (gastric) ulcers (Kato *et al.*, 1992; Aldoori *et al.*, 1997; Corrao *et al.*, 2004).

Social harms

Conflict with adults

Drinking on the street often brings young people into conflict with neighbours. Local residents can feel intimidated and threatened by groups of young teenagers hanging around their local area. The noise, litter and nuisance that young people generate when out drinking can sometimes provoke a threatening or violent reaction for adults who live in the vicinity. The security and physical confidence provided by being part of a group and the impact of alcohol on the teenager's decision-making can mean that conflict situations quickly escalate into violent confrontations. For example, one group (group 5, The Smart Rebels) reported several confrontations with local residents during their teenage drinking careers. On one occasion, when the young people were aged about 13, neighbours called the police, as the group was making too much noise. This, as for many young drinkers, was the group's first contact with the police:

... but then the third week we were too rowdy for the neighbours and they called the police on us ... but we saw the police coming up one side of the street and the way the flats were in behind a lot of houses, so there was an entry from one street into the next street, so as soon as we seen the police coming from one side, shit ourselves and ran through the entry and of course the peelers had come up the other side and blocked us in, and I think they were just there to scare the shit out of us, excuse my language, and they were just there to scare us and we hid our drink and I really panicked (09106).

Such events can have an impact on the drinking habits of young teenagers. The fear of getting into trouble with the police led this group to curtail their alcohol consumption for nearly a year, as members reverted to past hobbies and other interests such as sport:

... the police incident put me off a bit and I just decided to just stick to the football and I didn't really need a drink at that stage and I didn't really understand what drinking was about and I was only in first year and there was a lot more in my life going on at that stage and I was too young for it and it was one of those things that happened by fluke, because it was a random night that they decided to have a drink and after the police incident, I let it go (09106).

Eventually this effect wore off, and the young people became interested in alcohol again. The impact of any involvement with the police appears to be greatest on younger teenagers. When older, contact with the police is considered as almost an occupational hazard when drinking on the street. Groups often reported being routinely stopped by the police and having their alcohol confiscated. What many feared was the police informing their parents or their school, as this would result in them getting into further trouble. By way of example, one young girl (29018) was stopped and questioned by the police when out drinking with her friends (The Preppy Girls and other male and female acquaintances) on her 14th birthday. As the result of the alcohol consumption and other related antisocial behaviour, captured on the school's CCTV, the school subsequently informed her parents. Although the incident made her focus more on her school work, she did not dramatically alter her alcohol consumption. She was particularly concerned about the embarrassment and disappointment caused to her parents. Other members of The Preppy Girls were also suspended from school for a short period of time following this incident.

Confrontation with local residents or the police do not always involve street drinking. House parties also provide a source of friction between adults and young people, including incidents of more serious violence. For example, a number of members of group 5 (The Smart Rebels) were involved in a fight with residents after leaving a house party late at night. Although the incident was triggered by noise, alcohol played an important part in the escalation of the conflict (i.e. as both parties were drunk).

If we were in a house party, don't get me wrong, we would be drinking and having great craic, but then as soon as sort of we got out into the street, people were going home, we need to be quiet sort of thing, from then on and that incident definitely made me aware of other people around me, like environments around me like, when I'm out in the street I have to keep it down because people come out and I don't want anything like that to happen again because that was serious like and it was actually a guy [the local resident], he wasn't in the paramilitaries but he had a lot of family that was and so it could have got a lot worse, out of hand (09106).

Again, such incidents can prompt changes in drinking culture within the group. In this case, the young people became more aware of their surroundings and their impact on the local neighbourhood, not so much out of consideration for people living in surrounding houses, but more out of self-preservation and wanting to avoid any further violence. In Northern Ireland, the possibility of getting on the wrong side of local paramilitary figures adds another dimension to the concerns of the young drinker.

Teenage drinking is often associated with minor offending such as criminal damage and trespassing (e.g. Best *et al.*, 2006; Percy and Iwaniec, 2008; Bellis *et al.*, 2009). Alcohol may lower inhibitions, allowing young people to engage in delinquent acts. Again, such behaviours increase the likelihood that young people will come into conflict with local residents or the police. The young people in the study reported several incidents that resulted in them being stopped by the police, including breaking windows, throwing eggs at local houses and breaking into school property. None of these incidents resulted in young people being arrested. Instead the police usually decided to simply remove the alcohol and inform their parents or school.

Conflict with other teenagers

More than 50 per cent of the BYDS sample reported having witnessed someone being beaten up, and 15 per cent had seen a serious violent incident (McAloney *et al.*, 2009). Similar rates of exposure have been observed elsewhere (e.g. Stein *et al.*, 2003).

Both indirect (witness) and direct (victim) exposure to community violence is associated with higher rates of problem alcohol and drug use amongst young people (Fehon *et al.*, 2001; Brady, 2006; McAloney *et al.*, 2009). Amongst this qualitative sample of young teenage drinkers, fights or the threat of fights with other rival groups appeared to be a relatively common lifestyle feature. In some cases, this resulted from competition for control over local drinking spots, such as parks and waste ground. Many groups reported changing where they drank to avoid getting into fights with other groups. Incidents with other groups acted as an incentive for them to move off the street and to try and drink indoors.

When young people make the transition to drinking in licensed premises, their overall exposure to alcohol-related violence appears to increase in terms of both frequency and severity. In contrast to the relative isolation of small groups of teenagers drinking in locations well away from the attention of adults or other young people, pubs and clubs bring together large numbers of intoxicated young people in rather crowded and highly sexualised surroundings. It is unsurprising that this multiplies the risk of arguments and physical fights. For the respondents in this study, a change in the location of consumption coincided with a government-sponsored expansion of the alcohol-based night-time economy, specifically targeted at young drinkers (see Hobbs *et al.*, 2005).

The risk of violence can be further exacerbated by local factors such as a lack of late-night transport, a concentration of venues in particular locations, poor town layouts and irresponsible club policies (Engineer *et al.*, 2003). These factors encourage young people to congregate outside licensed venues, long after they have stopped drinking, as they search for more alcohol, fast food and transport home. As a result, many of the fights recounted in this study occurred in and around pubs and clubs, and arose from perceived minor slights such as being pushed or having drinks spilt. A few of the young men within the study actually relished their involvement in physical violence and recounted numerous incidents of

drunken fighting. For example, among The Peacocks, being able to fight and hold your own when threatened was an important part of group identity.

And then the guys 'ah, you're a fucking Taig [derogatory term for Irish Catholic], you're not allowed in this bar!' and all that. But I'd a couple of drinks in me, and I went 'fuck this' bang! and hit him and that was it over and just 'you fuck off' and I said to the bouncer 'look, he's out starting fights I'm only after hitting him, it's great!', but the bouncer didn't even do anything. He didn't throw me out and he didn't throw him out, so I'm standing in the bar and I was I just didn't you know the way your table is I'd the chair the wee stool was there and I went to sit the drink down and he hit me on the back of the head but in that second I just lifted the stool and battered him (10101).

... he just went 'What?', I said 'D'you see when I get out of this taxi I'm gonna break your jaw!' and he was 'wow!' and I says 'D'you know what it is mate, actually get out now' and I opened the door and reached my leg over and kicked him and he actually fell out! [laughs]. I didn't think he was actually gonna fall. I didn't even think the door would open but it's just the way it's that fast it's kinda scare tactic and 'get away you fucker and leave me alone!' (10101).

Although this group placed considerable importance on reputation and status and all members had participated in and witnessed physical fights, the willingness of one member, in particular, to start fights with strangers was put down to his own personal characteristics rather than being anything to do with his membership of the group. He recognised that alcohol fuelled his paranoia and mistrust of others and increased his desire to resolve any perceived slight or insult experienced by the group.

Sometimes fights occurred within friendship groups between drunken individuals. Generally, such disagreements were over quickly as other group members would intervene to calm the situation. Many of these involved disagreements over boy/girlfriends. Such arguments were more likely to escalate into an actual fight when boys were the main protagonists. None of the girls reported being involved in physical fights, although several did note that they had fallen out with other group members over boys.

It is clear that most of the physical and social harms reported by the respondents in our study were the result of acute intoxication rather than complications arising from longer term overconsumption. To an extent, the likelihood of teenagers experiencing harm as a result of their drinking is a factor more of individuals' inability to control their level of intoxication when out drinking than of their overall drinking pattern (although these two constructs cannot be completely separated). Some teenagers are less skilled than others in controlling alcohol intoxication in certain settings (see Chapter 4), resulting in an increased risk of a detrimental outcome.

In many cases these harms (i.e. negative incidents) triggered a change in drinking culture at both the individual and group level, suggesting that young people, by and large, do learn from their alcohol mistakes. However, the time taken for these events to effect a change on drinking behaviour varied between groups. For some groups, the salience of the outcomes was of sufficient significance to result in an immediate change in drinking behaviour (e.g. The Emoters, The Smart Rebels). In other cases, however, the behaviour was so embedded in the group's culture that the negative outcome needed to occur on several different occasions before any action would be taken to avoid future occurrences (e.g. The Peacocks). Also, it must be recognised that not all resultant changes in drinking behaviour initiated by groups were appropriate or effective in reducing risk. In fact, some cultural shifts, such as those aimed at reducing detection by adults, could lead to an increased risk of harms associated with acute intoxication (e.g. drinking faster to sober up earlier). Rarely did groups stop drinking or restrict their consumption in the aftermath of a negative experience. Instead they merely altered what they drank, avoided certain drink combinations or changed their drinking locations. Most changes in drinking culture observed in this study were undertaken to help the group achieve its drinking goals and purpose, to manage its consumption whilst reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes (i.e. loss of control).

7 Conclusions and implications of the findings

This study set out to examine the social habits and rituals fashioned by small groups of teenage drinkers. In light of the widespread changes in the alcohol marketplace, including the development and marketing of new products and brand extensions and the move towards 24-hour drinking, it is important to understand how young alcohol consumers engage with the product; where, when and how much they consume it; and the repertoire of cultural practices that emerge within groups of underage drinkers. This study examined the drinking habits of a number of close friendship groups identified within a large on-going longitudinal study of adolescent alcohol and drug use. Multiple individuals from each social group were interviewed to establish each group's drinking idioculture and how these cultures emerged and evolved from the group's first unsupervised contact with alcohol until age 18.

In the interviews conducted, young people described how they were introduced to alcohol, how alcohol became a regular feature of their social world and how their patterns of consumption changed as they grew older. The young people also discussed the strategies they used to manage their level of intoxication, what happened when these strategies failed and how drinking impinged on their relationships with friends, parents, other teenagers and adults. This study highlights the complex relationship that exists between teenagers and alcohol and how this varies across different friendship groups, challenging simplistic notions of underage drinking.

The myth of uncontrolled teenage drinking

Almost all the consumption undertaken by the young people in this study involved a concerted effort by the group to get drunk. It is the mood-altering effects of intoxication, and the ways in which these effects alter social interactions (increased social confidence, relaxation, reduced inhibitions, etc.), that young people seek when drinking. Generally, this involves the consumption of relatively large amounts of alcohol. However, simplistic portrayals of this consumption as out-of-control binge drinking, where young people are looking to 'get as drunk as they possibly can'¹ fail to capture the complexity of the decision-making undertaken by young people regarding the type, amount and pace of consumption. On the evidence of the interviews conducted for this study, teenagers very rarely set out to consume alcohol to a level at which they would lose control. If anything, there is considerable stigma amongst teenagers associated with failure to handle drink. The ability to consume alcohol in large quantities without losing control was a skill recognised and respected by young people. Passing out or being sick, in contrast, was regarded as a failure by the groups studied here. A member of a group who lost control was a liability to the whole group, increasing the likelihood of them being caught by parents or being identified as underage within a licensed premise, and requiring, in most cases, the group to look after and protect the individual. Uncontrolled drinking would also interfere with the social benefits of alcohol consumption, as perceived by the young drinkers, spoiling the evening for those involved. 'Getting just enough drunk' would appear to be a more accurate short-hand description of the attitudes and behaviours of the young drinkers towards alcohol consumption than that offered by contemporary media and political portrayals of binge drinkers. In many ways, teenage drinking parallels the consumption of alcohol by adults. Adults, by and large, also consume alcohol for its pleasurable mood-altering effects and how these effects facilitate

social interactions with friends. Where adults and teenagers may differ, although there are large variations within these populations, is in their definitions of 'just enough'.

Young drinkers modified their drinking goals for each drinking session depending on a range of social factors such as the amount of time they had to drink, the anticipated behaviour and reactions of their parents, the amount of money available to purchase alcohol, the locations available for consumption and other planned activities both during and after consumption. Groups tailored their notions of acceptable levels of drunkenness and their pace of consumption to suit this broader social setting. For example, if parents required their children to be home early, the teenagers would adjust the amount consumed, the time they started drinking or the pace of consumption to fit the allocated timeframe, whilst still achieving a degree of drunkenness and social interaction with their friends. Each of the groups studied developed a range of idiocultural rules and habits governing their 'controlled loss of control' (see Measham and Brain, 2005, for a discussion of this process). These involved the use of social comparisons with other young people on their perceived level of intoxications, and a range of associated techniques to regulate drinking either upwards or downwards depending on the results of the comparison. This is not to say that instances of extreme intoxication were not recalled by respondents, or that the young people interviewed never got very drunk, but these incidents are more accurately labelled episodes of miscontrolled drinking rather than uncontrolled drinking.

The above discussion raises important issues regarding the assessment of teenage drinking in both the research and practice environment. When assessing young people's alcohol use, the tendency is to ask about the quantity and frequency of consumption, the number of times they have been drunk and the number of times they have consumed more than five drinks in a session (a common indicator of binge drinking). Although important, such questions fail to capture any details of the variations in acceptable levels of intoxication between teenage drinking groups. The teenagers interviewed in this study appeared to spend considerable effort monitoring the level of drunkenness within their group. Collecting information on acceptable levels of intoxication should provide valuable insights into the drinking styles of teenagers and how these relate to the development of both acute and chronic problems.

Teenage drinking as a social/group activity

Most epidemiological studies of teenage drinking, including previous work undertaken by the authors of this report (for example, see Percy and Iwaniec, 2008), identify and select the individual as the primary unit of analysis. As a result, statistical models of teenage drinking tend to be based on variations in alcohol consumption within and between individuals. Whilst such work has undoubtedly led to significant advances in our understanding of the natural history of alcohol consumption in teenagers, it has ignored the fact that underage drinking is undertaken in groups. Teenage drinking, as a social phenomenon, takes place in naturally occurring clusters of individuals. In addition, this study has demonstrated that these clusters of young drinkers develop a complex idioculture surrounding their use of alcohol and that this small-group culture varies both between groups and within groups over time, as the young people extend their drinking experience and new drinking opportunities occur. The drinking behaviour of the individuals within the group is a product of (a) individual decisions and actions; (b) group alcohol culture, which facilitates social interaction within the group; and (c) the specific social setting in which the consumption occurs. These layers of social context are nested and interacting. Group drinking culture shapes the individual actions of group members, which themselves are shaped and altered by the actions, experiences and interactions of the group. Likewise, group culture evolves to accommodate changes in the social setting, for example drinking in new locations.

The rapid evolution of drinking etiquette

There is a strong association between age and drinking style. In a relatively short period of time (usually less than four years) young people progress from their first encounter with alcohol to regular drinking in bars and clubs (in many cases while still under the legal age for such activities). During this period, their drinking patterns undergo considerable change, including changes in the type and volume of drinks consumed, drinking locations (from outside to inside) and the social reasons underlying consumption, culminating in the incorporation of alcohol into their wider social lifestyle. Such alterations are accommodated within the shared drinking culture of the friendship groups. Underage drinking is a dynamic phenomenon, closely linked to the social and maturational changes that young people undergo during this developmental period.

Transitions in drinking context and increased vulnerabilities

Teenagers appeared to be at their most vulnerable to miscontrolling their alcohol consumption when drinking outside their normal social (drinking) context. This often occurs when young people change drinking locations, particularly when they first gain access to licensed premises or other group members' homes. Here, the rules and strategies employed by groups to govern their alcohol consumption no longer appear to be effective within the new drinking context. For example, natural checks on the quantity of alcohol consumed, such as being limited to the amount of alcohol that can be purchased at the start of the evening (when drinking on the street), no longer apply when drinking in a bar or club. As a result, young people can be tempted to drink beyond what they would normally consider to be their natural limit. When drinking in a bar, young people are faced with having to take decisions about the volume of alcohol consumed during an evening whilst under the influence of alcohol. When drinking on the street, these decisions have been taken before any alcohol is consumed. This further increases young people's vulnerability in new social settings. Likewise, young people new to drinking in 'rounds' or having people buy drinks for them (usually something that occurs only in bars or clubs) may have greater difficulty managing the amount they consume owing to the loss of individual control over their consumption. Young drinkers need to develop the skills and strategies to manage such situations.

Changes in drinking context also occur when young people start drinking with new groups or new friends, when they change the type of alcohol usually consumed or when they go on holiday with other friends. Existing signposts in the alcohol landscape, such as a group member against whom they may have benchmarked their own consumption, or the volume and strength of particular brands, can be removed or significantly altered, making it more difficult for them to manage their drunkenness. An example of this is the differing alcohol measures, particularly measures of spirits, encountered across European countries. As a result, the risk of overshooting the desired level of intoxication is greatly increased. Over time, the drinking culture of the group evolves to accommodate new drinking settings and contexts, but young people appear at their most vulnerable when changes in context initially occur.

Parents may sometimes be instrumental in facilitating these contextual shifts in drinking culture. For example, parents may permit older teenagers to begin to drink at home or may provide them with limited quantities of alcohol within certain controlled settings. This is often undertaken under the assumption that the teenager is a non-drinker, but is likely to start consuming alcohol before the age of 18. The reasoning, therefore, is that it is better for this onset to occur within a safe drinking environment, such as the home, rather than on the street. What some parents may fail to recognise is that their children may already be sophisticated alcohol consumers and part of an established group drinking culture, albeit one that is bounded by the challenges involved in unsupervised drinking. By changing the social context in which this consumption occurs, parents may inadvertently increase the vulnerability of their children to miscontrolling their consumption.

Peer pressure or selection?

It is clear from the interviews with the young people in this study that their drinking behaviours are influenced by the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of their friends. At times, some felt social pressure to consume alcohol in a particular way, for example to increase the pace of consumption to keep up with the group or to slow down if getting too drunk too quickly. Likewise, there is also evidence of young people moving between groups on the basis of the groups' alcohol consumption. However, it quickly became apparent during the analysis of these interviews that the impact of the group on the individual's consumption behaviour cannot be reduced to a simple debate as to whether peer pressure or selection is the most dominant social network force.

Friendship group members are active in the construction of their group's consumption culture. This culture, comprising shared traditions, knowledge, expectations and goals, helps the group to organise and manage its consumption behaviour (what to buy, how much to buy and where to consume it, etc.). It provides an accepted framework in which individual decisions and actions are played out. It would appear from the analysis presented here that the social network drivers of alcohol consumption patterns include social pressures (in particular, the pressure to conform to the culture of alcohol consumption within the group), social selection and a range of other cultural processes. These include the symbolic meanings attached to certain drinks and bottle sizes, the transmission of drinking knowledge between and within groups, the various roles adopted by key individuals within the group to facilitate their drinking sessions, the rituals and games developed by the group to manage its consumption and the group members' level of commitment to the consumption culture.

Alcohol and social acceptance

Alcohol plays an important part in normal adolescent social development. Young people who decide not to drink can face a degree of exclusion from many aspects of teenage social life. Such groups are in the minority; however, their abstention from alcohol consumption affects their social status within school, creates a barrier between them and more popular groups and restricts romantic relationships. School events, such as end of year parties, bring this social exclusion into sharp relief. To many young people, deciding to abstain from drinking alcohol is considered abnormal, marking groups of teenagers to be excluded from the mainstream youth culture.

The intoxication tightrope of teenage drinking

Although parents attempt to restrict young people's contact with alcohol, lay down rules about drinking and attempt to monitor any illicit alcohol consumption, most teenagers strive to circumvent these strategies, and many are successful. Young drinkers are constantly engaged in a careful balancing act between their desire to get sufficiently drunk to have a good time with their friends and their ability to sober up before going home to their parents. The whole group could get into trouble if one member overshoots the intended level of intoxication; thus, group members are prepared, if necessary, to intervene and help fellow underage drinkers to avoid this outcome. When parents tend to relax their rules as the young person gets older, the teenager continues to push against these boundaries. Even when caught drinking by parents, the typical response of the young person was not to stop consumption, but to attempt to develop better strategies to avoid detection. While this may have included a temporary reduction in consumption levels, it was not undertaken to comply with parents' wishes.

Implications for policy and practice

Restricting access

The findings from this study support the continued drive to restrict young people's access to alcohol at the point of sale. The young people in this study reported ready access to alcohol from a relatively young age. As well as reducing opportunities for young people to drink, restricting access to alcohol, either from off-licences or from pubs and clubs, may delay the important transitions in drinking behaviour reported in this study. For example, tighter enforcement of door admission policies at nightclubs may force older teenagers to postpone the switch from drinking on the street or at home to drinking in clubs. As young people appear to be particularly vulnerable during such transitions (see Chapter 4), when their alcohol idioculture may not be fully equipped to deal with a changed drinking environment, delaying this transition until the young people are a little more mature may help avoid some of the more common incidents of loss of control. Improved proof of age schemes, such as 'Challenge21', could have a significant role to play in restricting access to alcohol. Many of the young people in this study reported using siblings' IDs or fake IDs to procure alcohol. The introduction of age IDs that are harder to forge, such as passports or the PASS (Proof of Age Standards Scheme) system, recently developed by the British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA), may further curtail this strategy. Likewise, the use of scanners to validate the authenticity of identification could also be considered, with door staff involved in scanning authorised IDs (Morleo *et al.*, 2010). Alcohol enforcement campaigns that target access to alcohol have also been shown to reduce the risk of violent injury to young drinkers (Bellis *et al.*, 2006). Thus, strategies such as test purchasing in on- and off-licence outlets using under-18s and the application of fixed penalty notices for incidents of drunk and disorderly behaviour appear to generate a reduction in the number of alcohol-related admissions to accident and emergency units.

Youth-orientated clubs and bars

When the young people in our study made the transition to drinking in licensed premises, these premises were predominantly bars and clubs specifically tailored towards a younger clientele (i.e. under 30 years of age). Such establishments would contain few, if any, older drinkers. As a result, they could engage in a more hedonistic drinking style as younger drinkers tend to display a higher tolerance for displays of extreme intoxication. In stark contrast to this, the young people in this study reported adjusting their consumption downwards when drinking in bars frequented by older drinkers (i.e. over-30s). They reduced their drinking levels to avoid getting drunk in front of adults who might complain or inform their parents or the bar staff. Also, there was a perception amongst the young drinkers that drunkenness is not tolerated in such establishments in the way that it is in youth-orientated bars. Drinking in mixed age groups appears to be associated with the exercise of greater self-regulation amongst teenage drinkers than drinking in narrow age groups. However, the UK alcohol marketplace is increasingly age segregated, with premises catering for customers with a relatively narrow age range. This study would suggest that such market segmentation may contribute to increased levels of drunkenness amongst young people who drink mainly in the company of other young people, among whom extreme levels of intoxication are tolerated. Given the success of such establishments (Pratten, 2007), this trend may be hard to reverse.

Teaching harm reduction drinking skills

Teenage peer groups, if sufficiently determined, can gain access to alcohol. Once obtained, drinking generally involves the consumption of alcohol until an 'acceptable' level of intoxication is achieved by group members. It is the intoxicating effects of consumption that make it pleasurable for young people. It is also the intoxicating effect of alcohol that creates many of the alcohol-related risks that young people

encounter when drinking. In response, teenage drinkers evolve a range of strategies and techniques to regulate their level of intoxication. These include matching consumption to that of someone else in the group who gets drunk at the same rate, waiting for the onset of initial indicators of drunkenness (e.g. slurring speech) and using simple intuition to judge when they have had enough (the magic X factor referred to by several underage drinkers). However, when examined closely, these strategies are less than convincing as effective methods to avoid the social and physical harms associated with alcohol consumption. Their main purpose is to achieve an appropriate level of intoxication without adult detection, rather than to reduce the group's risk of social and physical harm when drinking. The primary risk, as perceived by the young drinkers, is that of being detected by their parents. It is also worth bearing in mind that teenage drinkers are called upon to implement these strategies whilst under the influence of alcohol. As the group members readily admitted, mistakes did occur. Most drinkers got too drunk and lost control at some stage in their teenage drinking careers, and a few were exposed to significant risks.

This loss of control can be considered as a failure on the part of the young people to exercise an appropriate level of self-regulation over both internal and external motivations to continue drinking (Percy, 2008). Although most young people gain a high degree of self-regulation over their alcohol consumption by early adulthood (see Chassin *et al.*, 2002; Jackson *et al.*, 2002; Flory *et al.*, 2004; Brown *et al.*, 2008), this experience is gained through trial and error, over an extended period of time. Many of our young people were left to develop this alcohol self-regulation on their own, with only their peer group for help and advice, and it is unsurprising that problems and mistakes occurred along the way. In light of this, it may be more advisable to attempt to provide some pragmatic advice, guidance and skills to young teenage drinkers so as to increase their level of self- and group regulation of consumption and intoxication, and to accelerate this traditional social learning process. In other words, we should attempt to teach young drinkers how to drink sensibly. A key point to note here is that this recommendation is aimed at teenagers who have already established a regular drinking culture and not at young people who have had limited exposure to alcohol intoxication.

Most school-based alcohol interventions aim to prevent or delay the initiation into alcohol use, with non-use as a primary goal (Neighbors *et al.*, 2006). Although such interventions may delay onset in low-risk individuals, they may have little impact on high-risk students or students already drinking alcohol (Masterman and Kelly, 2003). What is suggested here are interventions focused on teaching young drinkers how to avoid many of the common risks experienced when out drinking. The primary aim is not to prevent consumption or even to reduce overall levels of use (although this would be considered a positive secondary outcome), but rather to teach young people the skills by which to control their consumption so as to avoid getting too drunk. Such training could strive to promote individual self-regulation and moderate consumption of alcohol in an attempt to reduce the short-term, medium-term and longer term harm associated with alcohol use.

This examination of teenage drinking cultures does suggest a number of ways in which alcohol self-regulation could be improved amongst underage drinkers. At a basic level teenagers could be taught simple goal-setting skills, such as agreeing a limit on the number of drinks to be consumed before going out and counting the number of drinks consumed when out drinking, rather than relying on vague indicators of intoxication. Groups could also be taught to identify and manage high-risk drinking situations (e.g. tips on how to pace drinking and to be better monitors of each other's level of intoxication), and to develop strategies to minimise harm associated with drinking (e.g. avoiding physical confrontations, getting home safely, practising safe sex). Even those groups that reported extremely high levels of consumption also reported a degree of self-regulation. This limited self-regulation could be fostered and developed within these groups towards lower levels of acceptable intoxication and lower risk exposure.

Parents

Parents play an important role in the development of teenage drinking cultures (see Chapter 5). The parents of most our study participants were active in attempting to reduce the harm associated with teenage drinking, although it is debatable whether much of this activity was actually effective. Parents employed a wide range of different strategies. For example, when the young people were in their early teens a typical parental response was to monitor their child's behaviour in an attempt to prevent early unsupervised contact with alcohol. What is interesting is that it was other family members, in particular older siblings or other relatives, who often facilitated the young person's first use of alcohol. In many cases, as the young person grew older, their parents appeared to accept that they would eventually try alcohol and attempted to provide a controlled environment (usually the home) in which this could occur. Later, parents would often purchase alcohol for the young person to drink before going out and would provide lifts to and from clubs and bars (particularly for teenage girls) so as to reduce the amount of time the teenager spent out on the street at night.

Parents, however, were rarely aware of the level of alcohol consumed by their offspring. Young people often started drinking earlier and consumed greater amounts than their parents ever suspected. As a result, some attempts by parents to reduce risk actually increased the likelihood of the young person getting too drunk. For example, a decision to provide the young person with access to limited alcohol in the home was often taken without the appreciation that the young person was drinking outside the home as well. As a result, the young person's consumption actually increased.

The findings of this study have a number of implications for parenting strategies in relation to alcohol and, subsequently, for those offering advice and guidance to parents. When taking decisions regarding their teenager's drinking, parents should consider the possibility that their teenager's consumption is likely to be higher than they currently assume and adjust their strategies accordingly. It is unlikely that teenage drinkers, once they have become regular drinkers, will stop drinking altogether. In addition to placing sensible limits on free-time activities, parents may wish to consider talking to their older teenagers about sensible drinking: how to set limits on how much they drink, how to pace themselves, alternative non-alcoholic drinks, not drinking on an empty stomach and how to look after each other when out at night. Such discussions could be reinforced by parents modelling sensible drinking behaviours and decision-making within the home in relation to their own alcohol consumption.

Diversions activities and prosocial goals

A clear finding from this study was the positive impact that prosocial activities, such as sports, hobbies and school work, had on acceptable levels of drunkenness within groups. Those groups that had non-alcohol goals and targets (e.g. to achieve at sports, to get good school grades) appeared to be more competent at regulating their alcohol consumption. Although they still would get drunk, these groups tended to consume lower levels of alcohol to achieve their desired level of drunkenness. The young people constrained their drinking goals to avoid potential conflicts with other short-term and longer term goals. If they had a big match the next day, they would not get very drunk the night before. This suggests that encouraging young people to engage in prosocial activities may reduce overall alcohol consumption and the risk of acute and chronic alcohol-related harm. What is interesting to note is that the positive impact of these diversionary activities appears to occur mainly when the young people are actively engaged in them before they start drinking alcohol and, importantly, retain their commitment to them after they start drinking. This research sheds little light on whether engaging young people in such activities after they have started drinking would have any impact on their levels of consumption.

Notes

2 An introduction to the groups

- 1 Five-digit code numbers are used as to identify respondents within this study. The codes are the original cohort survey identifiers. The first two digits refer to the corresponding school the young person attended when he or she first completed a survey questionnaire. The remaining three digits are the young person's pupil ID code within the school.

7 Conclusions and implications of the findings

- 1 Quote by Hazel Blears MP (then Home Office Minister) made during a BBC *Today* programme interview marking the launch of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy in 2004 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3510560.stm>).

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Appendix I

Further methodological details

Background

This study has focused on the micro-culture of a small number of teenage friendship groups. Such an approach is based on a number of core operating assumptions, as identified by Fine and Fields (2008). First, many cultural phenomena observed at the small-group level are often present, with a similar cultural meaning, at higher levels of society, for example schools, neighbourhoods and broader youth subcultures. Analysis of the drinking behaviours of small groups can provide insights into the wider alcohol macro-culture. Second, the local setting can be generalised to other social settings. Drinking cultures documented within this study should apply (within reasonable constraints) to similar underage drinkers across the UK. Third, small-group drinking idioculture is not bounded by the group, but can diffuse outwards to other populations and settings. Cultural traditions and rituals can spread between social groups (through the movement of group members) and across situations as the group ages and develops. Finally, individuals can be considered as representative of the group to which they belong. The teenage drinker can report on the drinking patterns and behaviours of their social group.

The study also draws on the discipline of 'cultural epidemiology' (Torstle and Sommerfeld, 1996). Small-group culture may provide the mediating link between individual exposure to social risk factors for problem drinking (e.g. poor parenting practices, low attachment to education) and young people's drinking behaviours. Peer group culture provides a degree of social constraint on the range of actions the individual can undertake. As Fine (1979) argues, 'members choose from the group's repertoire of cultural options available, given a situational definition' (p. 737). The study of group idioculture may provide some insights into the design and delivery of novel intervention to reduce the harm associated with underage drinking.

This study utilised a modified form of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1997) as its core methodology. Rather than examining individual behaviour, however, the study focused on the group as its primary unit of analysis. It also drew on Fernández's (2004) expanded grounded theory research model, particularly in relation to the role of extant literature and memos in enabling the development of substantive theory.

Group selection

All respondents within the BYDS were asked to complete a series of peer nomination questions within each sweep. These asked the young people to list their 'best friends' and up to nine 'other friends'. The only constraint placed on the nomination process was that friends listed must be within the school year group (i.e. the BYDS cohort). Following completion of the school fieldwork, the personal details contained within the peer nomination forms were removed and replaced by individual ID codes to protect confidentiality. As with all other data collected, the peer ID codes were entered into the computer database using double keying.

As the majority of pupils within each eligible year group participated in the study, each sweep provides a snapshot of the social relationships across the whole network (school year group). Repeated application each year permits the tracing of changes in the structure of network ties (friendships) between network nodes (pupils). This provides a valuable record of the development and evolution of peer

friendship networks over the five years of their secondary school life. Pupils were also asked a number of supplementary questions on peer networks outside of school.

This peer nomination data was used to identify and select friendship groups within individual school year groups. Friendship groups are defined as informal and restricted social groups whose members have reciprocal friendship ties to all or most other members. Groups are not always stable over time and young people can move between groups. As teenagers grow older their social group also widens to become more of a 'social crowd' (Brown *et al.*, 1986a,b).

Selected friendship groups had to meet two basic requirements: (i) be of sufficient size (at least five) to permit the examination of group culture rather than just individual friendship ties and (ii) be relatively stable, containing a number of core members for at least three years. This was required to ensure the examination of the growth and development of a drinking culture amongst teenagers in regular contact with each other.

Groups were selected in both grammar and secondary schools to facilitate consideration of the impact that social class and its associated social variables (environment, disposable income, family capital, social norms) have on drinking culture. Both mixed-sex and predominantly single-sex groups were also examined to unpick the role of gender in the development of drinking. Groups displaying high levels of consumption and lower/moderate drinking patterns were also identified to facilitate the observation of cultural differences associated with different drinking levels. Individual migration between friendship groups was also examined to assess the impact that changing group membership may have on group culture and also the impact that different group culture has on the individual.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews

Most interviews were conducted within university offices. Interviews with respondents who lived outside Belfast were held in a neutral venue close to respondents' current residence. Interviews commenced with the completion of the consent procedures. In accordance with ethical guidelines, participants were provided with a participant information sheet outlining the aims of the study and the arrangements for consent and confidentiality. They were also offered the opportunity to ask questions about the research. If they were happy to participate in the study, the young people were asked to sign a form to confirm their informed consent.

Completed interviews were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. Transcription occurred as soon as possible after the interview was completed. This was a detailed recording of not only the words spoken by the interviewee and interviewer, but also other sounds (and pauses) made by the interviewee. Once completed, the transcription was checked for accuracy and any necessary modifications were made. Interviews were imported into NVivo for coding and analysis. A slightly modified grounded theory approach to data analysis was used. This process involved three main steps, progressing from the descriptive to the abstract and theoretical: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding and (c) selective coding. Although these procedures overlap in practice, they are described separately to aid comprehension.

Analysis

Interviews from each group member were coded as a single group rather than as separate individuals. As the study was an investigation of small-group culture, it was important that all comparisons made were at the group level and that the analysis did not include comparison of individuals between groups. This somewhat artificial segregation was quite difficult to achieve when researchers were working across individuals nested in multiple groups. However, the use of a software program – NVivo 8 – to support the extraction and storage of themes helped maintain this segregation.

Open coding

First, critical instances (i.e. significant or key events in relation to a particular topic) in each interview script were identified and open coded. This was undertaken on a sentence-by-sentence (line-by-line) basis, and as such it was time-consuming and labour-intensive and generated a vast number of codes. Allocated codes are recorded in NVivo. As the interviewing progressed across group members, all open codes were continuously compared and contrasted within each small group. Where new codes were identified in the transcripts, adjustments were made to reflect the accumulated findings. Codes were then sorted, refined and condensed into concepts before being regrouped into higher order factors called categories. Key concepts and categories were also compared across the transcripts and modified accordingly to accommodate new data. Discussions were held amongst the research team to verify the process of assigning categories. These discussions were also used to construct and refine memos (brief write-ups of ideas about substantive categories and their relationships as they emerge during coding, collecting and analysing data).

Axial coding

Axial coding was used to look for connections between the conceptual categories. It involves making connections between categories and their properties (e.g. the context in which the category is embedded and the preconditions that give rise to it) as well as identifying categories of different levels of importance (e.g. major or minor status and linkages across these levels). Memoing was also used here to hypothesise possible theoretical links among the categories.

Selective coding

The properties and relationships among categories were further conceptualised by selective coding. This was the final stage of data analysis and involved the identification of a 'core' category, whereby all the categories from the axial coding were integrated into a single theme. This was also the stage of analysis in which the coding was moved from the descriptive to the theoretical level. The core theme is central in explaining how different categories and subcategories are intertwined in their representation of teenage drinking cultures.

Methodological challenges

The fact that the primary 'unit of analysis' was the friendship group and not the individual drinker generated a number of methodological challenges that the research team had to address. First, although potential interviewees belong to a large population of students, those contacted for interview belonged to a very much smaller finite peer group (usually between four and ten individuals). The normal practice of replacing a refusal with a new sample member was not always possible owing to the small number of members in each of the selected groups. As a result, a number of potential interviewees were not included in the study as corresponding members of the peer group were unwilling to participate. To an extent, interviews had to be negotiated almost at the group level.

Social networks that existed within the school environment did not always translate to the non-school social world. It was essential for this study that the peer groups examined were the social groups in which young people consumed alcohol. It became apparent during a number of interviews that young people who were close friends within school did not engage in alcohol consumption together. Although this data could not be used for the examination of group alcohol idioculture, these individual interviews were used to test the extent to which identified cultural phenomena also existed within other drinking groups.

A grounded theory approach requires the researcher to undertake a constant comparison. When the unit of analysis is the individual, the comparison is between the new interview data and previous interviews. This is a relatively simple process whereby past interviews shape the structure of future

interviews (by generating emerging theory which can be tested in the future interview) and new interviews are compared with past interviews (i.e. the actual testing of emerging theory). With the study of groups, this constant comparison becomes a two-stage process. At the first stage, individual interviews within a single group are compared to help establish the group culture. A second stage then involves the comparison of cultures across groups. This two-stage process imposes constraints on the interviewing and analysis of interview data. Attempts were made to ensure that groups were interviewed independently of each other and that all interviews within a group were completed before interviewing of another group commenced. This was to minimise the contamination of the individual-level comparison by data collected from another group/culture. This slowed down the recruitment process, as the final members of the group (interviews 3 and 4) were sometimes difficult to locate. It was not always possible to achieve these goals, and interviews within specific groups did overlap on occasions. However, any negative impact on the analysis of the data should be minimal.

And, finally, unlike individuals, groups are not a fixed entity and shift and change over time. Members can leave and return to a peer group and groups can expand or contract. To a degree the boundaries of all the social groups were fluid, which can create difficulties in determining the group culture. The groups examined within this study reflect this mutability.

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