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‘It is ok to be drunk, but not too drunk’: Party socializing, drinking ideals, and learning trajectories in Swedish adolescent discourse on alcohol use

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Abstract

This study explores adolescent reasoning behind the use of alcohol at different types of parties, often house parties, and about the strategies to achieve maturity and prevent losing control. The data consist of semi-structured interviews with 23 adolescents aged 16-18 years (16 males and seven females). The interview transcripts were analysed using an inductive, thematic approach. All informants had personal experience with drinking at parties in different social settings. Our results suggest that the process of learning how to drink, often through failure in terms of being intoxicated, is important for adolescents’ who strive to control their alcohol intake resulted in a good time and a break from everyday life. Furthermore, the results indicate that different social settings and party types engender different drinking patterns. Maturity and controlled conduct come across as desired ideals that provide a person with symbolic capital and thus, social status.

Keywords: adolescents, alcohol, party socializing, drinking cultures, interview data

Introduction

Alcohol use among underage adolescents has been a debated topic for many decades in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic nations. The political and public discourses have been morally imbued; a youth’s drinking has been connected to health risks, deviant behaviour, and future problems for society as well as for the individual. Thus, policies have been designed with the goal of decreasing adolescent alcohol intake and previous research has focused mainly on risks and prevention (Bergmark 2004, Blackman 2011, Valentine et al. 2008). Thus, there is a lack of research regarding the positive aspects of alcohol and party socializing and additional research is needed to explore adolescents’ experiences and justifications for using or not using alcohol (Frederiksen, Bakke, and Dalum 2012,

Hunt, Evans, and Kares 2007). The present study aims to broaden our understanding of how adolescents perceive their alcohol use.

From what we know, partying and getting drunk with friends is associated with pleasurable experiences like laughing, dancing, and having a good time. It is a normalised way to socialize. Both girls and boys talk about parties as being important social events because parties represent a break in everyday life (Percy et al. 2011). There are different locations where alcohol is consumed such as in homes, at party venues, at pubs for those who are legally permitted to do so, or outside. House parties are appreciated forms of partying and socializing. The home provides a place for young people to solidify and enhance social bonds in a private social setting (Wilkinson 2015). In Scandinavia, the setting for the present study, the home is the most common location for adolescent parties (Storvoll, Rossow, and Pape 2010). Having access to home locations, without the presence of adults, enables the party participants to decide with whom to socialise and unwanted people can be locked out. Adolescents talk about house parties as being different from drinking in open spaces such as parks and such parties evoke a feeling of safety (Ander, Abrahamsson, and Gerdner 2015, Roberts et al. 2012).

Cultural aspects must be acknowledged in order to broaden our understanding of alcohol consumption among young people. Different groups of adolescents in any given country can utilise substances in various ways and for different purposes (Percy et al. 2011) but contrasts between countries are also notable. Drinking trajectories and patterns and the social occasions where alcohol is introduced vary considerably. For instance, while intoxication for Finnish youth occurs exclusively with friends and for the purpose of becoming drunk, the dominant pattern in Italy is for youth to be introduced to alcohol through moderate drinking with the family (Rolando, Törrönen, and Beccaria 2014). Moderate consumption is desirable in nations such as Italy and France and alcohol is often introduced at family events (Petrilli et al. 2014, Acier et al. 2015). In contrast, drinking to get drunk with peers characterises the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon contexts (Seaman and Ikegwuonu 2010, Demant and Østergaard 2007, Blackman 2011).

However, the controlled intake of alcohol and composed behaviour tend to be prominent ideals in these cultural contexts. Controlled conduct signifies maturity, conscientiousness, and responsible behaviour (Norell and Törnqvist 1995, Szmigin et al. 2008). Fry (2011) has argued that to seek pleasure is a rational behaviour for any individual but the person must behave according to social norms when utilizing alcohol,

otherwise, he or she risks sanctions. Adolescents who control their drinking and behave in a composed manner are viewed as more mature while those who fail to control their drinking risk denigration, especially if they are female (de Visser and McDonnell 2012). (Aresi and Pedersen 2015) have shown that adolescents try to optimise how much they drink in order to maintain a desired level of drunkenness while at the same time, they minimise negative social and physical outcomes. Accordingly, we can assume that different strategies are applied to maintain controlled conduct while drinking. However, little is known about these strategies and how they are connected to social environments and peer groups.

The study

The purpose of the present study is to explore Swedish adolescent discourse on alcohol usage. We investigate how Swedish adolescents justify partying and alcohol use and analyse the notions and ideals that surface regarding socializing, forms of partying, and alcohol intake. In addition, our analysis illuminates the different strategies that adolescents tend to apply to maintain their status and respect by behaving according to the social norms.

The Swedish context

In recent years, underage alcohol consumption has decreased in many countries around the world. In Sweden, a recent national survey shows the lowest use of alcohol among 15 to 16 year-olds since the 1970s (Gripe 2015). The age limit in Sweden to buy alcohol from state regulated liquor stores is 20 years of age and 18 years of age from restaurants or pubs. Many adolescents can, however, access alcohol with the help of siblings, parents, other adults, or through illegal alcohol dealers. Of the 15 to 16 year-olds who were asked about their substance use, 44 percent of females and 40 percent of males reported having used alcohol in the past 12 months (Gripe 2015). Official, national directives and campaigns point frequently to the law that prohibits underage drinking, which is promoted in television advertisements and other media as a means to reduce or obstruct underage alcohol use. Moreover, it is recommended that parents refrain from offering their underage children any alcohol at family occasions (Socialdepartementet

2016). Preventive interventions in the form of parent education programmes through schools have been common (Koutakis, Stattin, and Kerr 2008). However, it was concluded in a recent meta review that these interventions seldom deter young people from using alcohol and that school based programs do not prevent drug use in general (SBU 2015).

Theoretical departure

The usage of alcohol can be viewed as an identity marker that is vital for adolescents in their transition to adulthood. Lalander (1998) and (Sande 2002) have suggested that events and traditions related to alcohol consumption can be regarded as *rites of passage* that mark the end of childhood and the transition toward adulthood. However, according to Smith (2014), the phrase ‘transition to adulthood’ is misleading because the symbols of adulthood and adolescence, of maturity and immaturity, blur together and are dynamic. All the same, Demant and Østergaard (2006) have proposed that partying and being drunk correspond with a decline of parental control and indicate a transition away from childhood towards adulthood.

Our theoretical stance is that the usage of alcohol indeed is a marker of a new phase and of the person gradually departing childhood but also that adulthood, childhood, and adolescence are dynamic, interrelated concepts that are reconstructed, defined, and negotiated depending on the social setting. Moreover, we apply the term *drinking culture* in order to illuminate the dynamic aspects of alcohol use. Percy et al. (2011, 10) have defined drinking culture as ‘the social customs, habits, and rules shared by groups of drinkers that surround their consumption of alcohol in specific social settings’. Thus, the use of alcohol varies and can involve different meanings and practices. Because individuals can socialize and be part of several groups, our understanding is that the individual’s conduct potentially varies depending on the social context and thus should not be regarded as static. This calls for an investigation into how the social setting influences the participants’ consumption of alcohol. In addition, our analyses are informed by the notion that a person’s conduct is based on gender. That is, a person’s behaviour is deemed appropriate or inappropriate, mature or childish, depending on his or her gender (Room 1996). Thus, gendered ideals and ideas influence a person’s behaviour as well as his or her thoughts. Gendered ideals become evident in studies of

female and male alcohol consumption and drunkenness. Heavy drinking by males appears to be more accepted and anticipated, with few risks for social sanctions, while intoxicated females risk being stigmatized and forming a bad reputation (Blackman, Doherty, and McPherson 2015, Blackman 1995). That said, gendered notions are continuously negotiated and reinterpreted and are thus relevant for continuous exploration (Demant 2007).

In our analysis, we were inspired by the concept of symbolic capital and used it to understand the role of alcohol among groups of adolescents. Symbolic capital is not economic or social capital but can be understood as ‘what every form of capital becomes when it obtains an explicit or practical recognition’ (Bourdieu 2000)242). Symbolic capital is seemingly a positive signal and it makes the holder ‘visible, admired, and invited’ (ibid.), in other words, socially respected. We apply the term in order to explore social ideals connected to socializing and alcohol intake. Previous research on alcohol use has proposed that the adolescent gains higher social status through symbols of maturity and that experience with drinking equals maturity (Järvinen and Gundelach 2007). Large social networks that facilitate socializing and partying are also important forms of symbolic capital as well as being an experienced consumer of alcohol (Smith 2014).

Data and methodology

The data consist of semi-structured interviews with 23 adolescents, 16 males and seven females, aged 16-18 years (see Appendix). A total of 18 interviews were conducted. The interviews were performed with one, two, three, or four interviewers and took place in separate rooms in three youth centres. A few informants requested to be interviewed with friends and/or on several occasions; consequently, eight interviews contained one informant, eight interviews contained two informants, one interview contained three informants, and one interview contained four informants. Two of the informants participated in two interviews (Tom and Mats) and two of the informants (Nora and Siv) were interviewed four times.

The informants resided in three small towns (less than 15,000 inhabitants) and one city with over 100,000 inhabitants, in parts of southern Sweden. They attended secondary school and lived in apartments or detached houses with one or two parents and siblings.

The informants were recruited from three local youth centres where the youth workers introduced the first author of this article (BA) to the youngsters who attended the centres. Snowball recruitment was also used; some informants asked friends if they wished to participate. Participation criteria were as follows: youths aged 16-18 with personal experience in partying and intoxication and with a willingness to participate in the study after written and oral information regarding the research project had been provided. The informants were able to choose whether they wanted to be interviewed by themselves or with friends. All interested adolescents were provided oral and written information; those willing to be interviewed signed a letter of consent. It was emphasised that participation in the study was voluntary and that the participant could withdraw from participation at any time without stating reasons for doing so. Personal data was handled confidentially and the names used herein are pseudonyms. The study was approved by the regional vetting board in Linköping.

An interview guide was used that contained themes related to being drunk, socializing and partying, friends, and alcohol intake. The questions were as follows: How often do you go to parties? Where are the parties located? With whom do you go and do you know other persons at the party? How much do you drink? When did you start drinking? How did you learn to drink? Why do you drink? Positive effects of intoxication? Negative effects of intoxication? What are the different types of parties? The interview guide was given to informants at the beginning of the interview and the informants were given the opportunity to choose the order of the questions. The interviews lasted 20-60 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interview data has limitations such as possibly distorted answers due to anxiety, politics, or personal bias (Patton 2002). Moreover, the answers given by the adolescents might not represent a true picture of their actual drinking practices at parties. What can be said is that there are strong similarities in the informants' reasoning, despite differences in gender, family structure, socioeconomic status, and town/city of residence. The discourse of the Swedish adolescents also resembles studies that involve youth in other national contexts (Percy et al. 2011), which increases the reliability of their answers. Even though the number of interviewees varied during the interviews, from single interviewees to four participants, the results do not indicate differences attributable to the number of persons being interviewed; the interviewees depicted matters in similar ways and used similar terms in their discourse.

Analytical procedure

A general inductive approach was applied where recurrent themes were identified after the content had been coded (Patton 2002, Thomas 2006). The transcriptions were read repeatedly by all of the present authors and prominent themes were detected. The categorisation of themes was then discussed among the authors. All authors were active in the process of familiarizing themselves with the data, coding the content, and identifying themes. The steps for thematic analysis put forth by (Braun and Clarke 2006) influenced our analytical conduct as follows: 1) the content was coded, 2) recurrent themes were identified, and 3) themes were reviewed and validated. In the present study, the following themes were detected: party socialising, functions of alcohol intake, the ideal of control, planning, gender similarities and differences, the learning trajectory, and maturity/immaturity. A majority of the identified themes were found in most of the interviews. Our theoretical departure informed the analytical conduct in order to deepen and elaborate on the analysis after the themes had been detected.

The results were developed based on the themes that surfaced in the analysis. Quotation's were chosen to illustrate the themes and to make the voices of the adolescents heard.

Results

In the data, themes regarding drinking alcohol, intoxication, parties, and peer socialising emerged. The adolescents connect ideal drinking conduct with controlled intake and easy-going socialising rather than heavy intoxication. However, this conduct evolves only after a phase of learning by doing. Learning to control one's alcohol intake is a phase that the informants connect to young adolescents of approximately 13-15 years of age. Learning to control one's drinking involves learning how much to drink and to plan accordingly. In addition, it includes the organisation of parties that are perceived as safe and secure social milieus, either larger parties with hired guards and/or special guest lists but more often, smaller parties at someone's parental home where attendees are a few close friends. The ideal drinking conduct is being in control of one's intake; this is connected to the positive characteristic of having matured. The informants relate maturity to controlled intake and the planning of drinking and parties but also to conduct such as

caring about one's own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. Maturity, which comes across as the desired endpoint in the learning trajectory, involves the ability to control one's drinking behaviour but also to care for and support friends who have not yet reached this level of maturity. The following sections serve to demonstrate and further analyse these findings.

To party and socialise

Drinking and partying (that is, socialising) are strongly connected; a person drinks at a party with friends, never by him or herself, and preferably not with people with whom he or she is not acquainted. Most informants from the data were under the legal drinking age of 18 years but even those who were over 18 had only limited experience with drinking at pubs and restaurants. The preferred location was a private party. Several informants brought up that they occasionally attended larger parties of 20 people or more. Such parties were often held to celebrate something special such as a birthday or graduation. The parties included a mixture of old and new friends and often involved rather heavy drinking. However, house parties in parental or sibling homes were talked about as being more frequently visited and preferable in many ways. Michael, 18 years old, answers the question regarding the types of parties he attends as follows: 'They are always under a roof, in other words, always in someone's home' (Interview 9).

A parental home, with no parents or other adults in attendance, promises a location that feels safe – people can be invited but also locked out. These parties can consist of a larger or smaller number of people: 10-20 friends who know each other well through school or leisure activities, boys as well as girls, or around 4-6 close friends who spend a significant amount of time at other events where alcohol is not consumed. Trust and intimacy characterise smaller house parties. This form of socialising with alcohol is referred to as providing a particular sense of security; the person is safe and taken care of in the event he or she drinks too much and loses some control. The following quote from Monica exemplifies this recurring reasoning: 'I don't like to drink when there's lots of people. I like to drink with those I really know' (Interview 10). Michael reasons in a similar way. In accordance with the overall opinions of the informants, Michael argues that to him, parties containing a small number of close friends are preferred. These

parties provide a socially safe and secure environment: 'It's the way it is, we trust each other and we know how much alcohol the others drink' (Interview 9).

The smaller house parties are talked about as involving both genders or only females or only males. In the girls' reasoning, girls-only parties allow for more giggles and girl-talk. The males connect their boys-only gatherings with having a few beers together while watching sports on TV or having a BBQ by a lake in the summertime. Some informants refer to girls-only or boys-only parties as providing a social location where a person can risk losing control without being portrayed by others as being childish and immature. Thus, these parties provide a safe place for heavy drinking and for testing one's limits regarding alcohol intake. However, single-sex parties are also referred to as parties where less alcohol can be consumed, compared to a mixed party. It appears that these parties are often connected with 'hanging out', having a few beers with the boys, or a couple of glasses of wine with the girls while watching TV, playing cards, or having a bite to eat. 'We listen to music, drink alcohol, laugh, and play cards' (Interview 10), said Annica when asked to define a good party consisting of a few friends. Verner, when talking about somewhat larger house parties, describes such parties in the following way: 'We sit and talk. We watch TV or listen to music. Well, we do a little bit of everything' (Interview 7).

The function of drinking at parties is referred to as a break in everyday life. Alcohol helps the person to relax and to forget about his or her chores and concerns such as school, love relations, or problems within the family. A good, preferable party and what it should engender is defined accordingly. One example is a quote from Stina who talks about the perfect party as containing 'the right number of people, good music, and it makes you relax and have a good time' (Interview 4). Some informants refer to drinking as enabling them not only to relax in general but, in particular, in relation to other people. For instance, the alcohol enables them to interact and converse more comfortably. Nicholas, for instance, answers the question of why he drinks as follows: "Sometimes I can be a bit shy, and when I... well, with alcohol I can... I'm not as shy and the others also drink which makes the atmosphere better' (Interview 6).

To be in control

To have control over one's drinking is discussed as being essential; intoxication may result in being too relaxed in one's manners towards others and such behaviour could decrease a person's chances for love and cause others to feel guilt and shame towards that friend. About attending mixed-sex parties, Tom's interview was as follows:

Tom: You don't drink as much as you do with the blokes. When girls are there you want to take it a bit easy [laughter].

Interviewer: You don't want to disgrace yourself, or what?

Tom: You don't want to do that, no [laughter] (Interview 1).

In Tom's reasoning, we detect the logic that also appears in the girls' argument that single-sex parties provide a milieu where control can be somewhat loosened and the potential consequences of drinking too much are perceived as less damaging to one's social reputation. In the overall data, learning how to handle alcohol and intoxication with a sustained sense of control and composed behaviour comes across as the ideal. Jonas, for instance, points to this ideal: 'I want to have control of what I am doing' (Interview 8). The intake of alcohol, as stated above, is motivated by alcohol's ability to engender positive feelings such as being relaxed, joyful, and communicative but to 'let loose' still involves being in control. As Nora says: 'It's fun to get drunk when you remember the evening, because then you had a good time, you controlled yourself. It's not funny to be so sloshed that you can hardly walk, swaying everywhere' (Interview 12).

In this quote, Nora relates being out of control to having difficulty walking or remembering the evening. We suggest that a person can be heavily intoxicated even without such signs. The point here, however, is that the adolescents recurrently emphasise the importance of controlled conduct. The ideal, of not being intoxicated, surfaces when the informants refer to themselves, as Nora did, or in more general terms, as Tom does here: 'You shouldn't get drunk, you shouldn't. You should know your limits, how much you can drink and then you shouldn't.... A person should be able to handle things' (Interview 1).

Controlled conduct requires certain strategies and planning. The adolescents refer to both the planning of parties – where to party and with whom – and the intake of alcohol (i.e., what beverages to drink and how much). Siv explicates the importance of planning:

I don't want to drink when I haven't planned to drink and haven't planned how much I'd drink. Well, if I don't [plan], well, it just doesn't work. Because [when you start drinking] you don't think clearly, do you? Therefore, it's best to plan in advance (Interview 13).

To achieve the right level of intoxication comes across as being very important for the adolescents. On some occasions, when partying with close friends of the same sex in someone's home, heavy drinking and less controlled manners can be socially acceptable with no risk of social sanctions. Controlled conduct is, however, preferable and is the social norm at larger parties that contain both genders and unfamiliar people.

To learn and mature

The practice of controlled conduct and the knowledge of how much to drink to reach the desired level of drunkenness do not evolve without a period of learning. The informants talk about this learning process and give examples of how they and their friends have learned to control their alcohol intake and consequently, their behaviour. Learning by doing signifies a phase that starts around 13 to 15 years of age and lasts approximately one to two years. Disorderly intoxicated conduct such as vomiting, memory gaps, falling asleep, and being overly emotional are brought up as being common during this phase of learning. The following quote illustrates the reasoning of the adolescents:

Interviewer: You say you have to learn how to drink?

Monica: Yes, to have control.

Interviewer: How did you learn how to drink when you were 13?

Annica: We didn't!

Monica: We drank everything back then.

Interviewer: But when did you start to learn?

Monica: It took me a year. I drank beer with a friend and we both got sick, then I couldn't remember anything. That made me learn to take it easy (Interview 10).

Experience with drinking too much leads to knowledge about how much one can drink without losing control. All informants were underage and by law prohibited from drinking when they started to use alcohol. Nowhere in the data are friends, family, or other sources that could provide information about alcohol intake mentioned. Rather, learning how to drink was depicted as the result of the individual's own experiences, as Jonas expressed when he was interviewed.

Interviewer: Who did you learn from, how to drink?

Jonas: I learned by myself. I have never asked anybody how I should drink, how much. I learned by myself after the school kick-off, [I learned] my limits, how much I can take.... I'm in great control of my drinking. I know when I take it too far or not. When I'm at a party where I don't know the people, then I go easy. When I'm with family and friends, then, perhaps, I drink a bit more, but I'm not that kind of person who drinks just for the sake of getting really drunk (Interview 8).

The quote from Jonas illustrates the overall reasoning we found in the interviews that controlled conduct is the ideal but that this practice evolves only after a period of learning by experience. In addition, it points to the situated and social nature of drinking behaviour. The intake of alcohol and the emphasis on controlled conduct varies depending on with whom you socialise at a particular party.

After learning to control one's drinking and behaviour, maturity has been reached. Maturity and immaturity are concepts that the informants use in the interviews. Maturity is related to behaviour that indicates that a person knows how to achieve and maintain the accepted level of drunkenness, depending on the specific party and drinking culture. A mature person knows when to stop drinking and as such, is in control of his or her intoxication. Immaturity, on the other hand, is connected to the uncontrolled intake of alcohol and vomiting, being emotional, falling asleep, etc. The discourse on immature behaviour contains differences in how the genders are depicted. Females who act immaturely are labelled by some informants as 'fjortisar'. This is a diminutive term for a 14-year-old and some of the informants apply the term to females who are 'hammered and crying and vomiting' (Monica, Interview 10) and who 'scream and are loud, dress like sluts and think they own the world' (Mats, Interview 15). Immature males, on the other hand, are referred to as being a pain and as brawlers but also as being fun and

acting like a clown. 'If a guy's really drunk, you usually laugh at him. If he's unconscious, you help him', Mats states (Interview 16).

Mature behaviour is connected not only to controlled conduct but also to caring for oneself and others, i.e., being responsible. The adolescents give examples of how they care for each other, for instance, by helping intoxicated friends. Steve says:

I always check on my friends. There is always someone who drinks less and keeps an eye on the others. You help them to get home if someone gets too drunk. Like a friend of mine, we first had to carry him for I don't know how long, then we phoned a sibling who came and gave us all a lift (Interview 3).

The quote from Steve suggests that socialising with alcohol at parties involves caring for friends. Friends can be at different stages of the learning process and thus, some need to be looked after by others. 'I've told her that I'll keep an eye on her' (Interview 12), Nora says when she explains how one of her best friends started using alcohol years after Nora did and consequently, has not yet learned how to control her intoxication. In addition, the adolescent reasoning indicates that a person's behaviour is dynamic and situated. At some parties, a person's manners can be evidence of maturity but on other occasions, the person may act in immature ways; in some social milieus, such as with close, intimate friends, immature behaviour does not lead to social sanctions, but in others, it may.

Concluding discussion

This study highlights the importance of parties as an arena for adolescent socializing and peer socialization. Adults in society often describe parties and drunkenness among underage youth in negative terms. Sweden, for instance, through its laws and regulations, has for decades attempted to reduce the consumption of alcohol among adolescents: risks are emphasised in national campaigns and municipalities have funded and promoted parent education programmes that focus on youth substance use. These images of risk and danger are in stark contrast to how adolescents refer to their drinking habits, their ways of socializing, and their ideals (Percy et al. 2011, Demant and Østergaard 2006). The present study suggests that the use of alcohol and learning to control one's drinking renders symbolic capital among peers; these practices connote maturity and the transition

from childhood to adulthood. In addition, the use of alcohol is connected to pleasurable and memorable moments together with friends. The adolescents in our data refer to socializing while drinking as a way to unwind; the party is perceived as a break from the everyday routine. In this regard, assuming that seeking pleasure in different ways is a rational behaviour (Fry 2011), adolescent consumption of alcohol can be looked upon as reasonable and expected.

Even though there has been a substantial decrease in adolescent use of alcohol in Sweden and other countries over the past few years, many individuals still get intoxicated. Heavy drinking appears to be part of adolescent partying (Hibell et al. 2012). Rolando et al. (2014) have claimed that adults rather than adolescent peers perceive drunkenness among young persons as blameworthy. Our study suggests that underage alcohol consumers are far removed from the typical portrait of out-of-control binge drinkers. Young drinkers place considerable emphasis on being able to control their drinking behaviour. The adolescents who were interviewed talked about a learning trajectory that ends with controlled drinking. Controlled conduct connotes maturity, which is a form of desirable symbolic capital. Our findings resemble how youth refer to their drinking behaviour in other national contexts (e.g., Percy et al. 2011). The term ‘controlled loss of control’ (Measham and Brain 2005) is useful in that it expresses the ideal of controlling one’s conduct.

In addition, we propose that different social settings engender different drinking behaviours. That is, the drinking culture varies depending on where and with whom the alcohol is consumed. Both males and females in our data talk about small house parties consisting of close friends of the same sex as the social setting where they feel they can explore their limits of alcohol intake and lose control without being socially stigmatized. These parties provided a safe environment for learning how to drink. The boys-only or girls-only parties provided leverage to act out and behave in immature ways without risking social sanctions (cf. Demant 2007). Moreover, the adolescents in our data emphasise care and mutual responsibilities for each other’s health and wellbeing. Those who are experienced drinkers and who are thus able to control their intake appear to look after inexperienced friends but there is also a general reasoning about taking care of each other while consuming alcohol. The adolescents give examples of taking turns being sober or being the one who drinks moderately so that intoxicated friends can rely on being taken care of if necessary. Furthermore, reasoning surrounding self-care is

recurrent; different strategies are employed to avoid heavy intoxication and the physical and social damage that may result. The adolescents talk about planning with whom, where, and how much to drink, as a strategy to avoid being intoxicated. Learning how to drink – to test one’s limits and how one functions and behaves after drinking – is preferably done in a safe social milieu with close friends, which is referred to as another strategy to avoid harm and the formation of a bad reputation. Additionally, caring for others and being cared for also provide a safer drinking environment.

In Sweden, adolescents go through the learning process of how to master and control intoxication in the absence of adults; learning by doing together with friends characterises adolescent drinking. Swedish national policies probably play a part in this because national regulations prohibit underage consumption of alcohol in any setting, including in family settings. In France and Italy, on the other hand, the family tends to play a greater role in the socialization of alcohol consumption (Petrilli et al. 2014, Acier et al. 2015). Thus, it can be stated that Swedish policies force adolescents to consume and learn how to use alcohol away from their parents and other significant adults. A Norwegian study on the implications of drinking with parents showed that drinking with parents was significantly associated with high-risk drinking (Pape, Rossow, and Storvoll 2015). It has been suggested that the Swedish drinking culture among adults has changed in the past decades, from heavy drinking during weekends to more moderate drinking during the week (Raninen, Leifman, and Ramstedt 2013). The adolescent reasoning in our study may be a reflection of these seemingly changed ideals. We must also ask whether it would be appropriate to revise the national regulations and campaigns accordingly. Why are the aspects of pleasure not part of the national campaign to reduce alcohol consumption? Do adolescents recognise themselves and their experiences in campaigns that only address risks? Would it be such a great mistake if parents became more active in introducing their adolescents to moderate drinking, as appears to be the case in France and Italy, for instance?

Preventive measures have often been aimed at reducing adolescent use of alcohol. The results of this study suggest that interventions that do not take the context of adolescent alcohol use into consideration may not be sufficiently effective. Where, with whom, how, and the varying patterns of drinking on different social occasions as well as the pleasurable aspects of drinking must be considered in the design of future preventive efforts.

Conclusions

For groups of adolescents, parties and drinking represent a break from the monotony of everyday life and are pleasurable activities. They are sophisticated consumers and employ a range of strategies to avoid losing control. These strategies are sometimes of limited efficacy and issues certainly might arise. Adolescents also employ different strategies on how to care for their friends if they get too drunk.

How can adults support and assist adolescents who have problematic drinking patterns without condemning their ways of socializing? How can the pleasure aspect be understood as relevant for groups? Are there new ways to think about and implement alcohol reducing prevention activities? Are there new ways to teach adolescents how to drink? What is the role of parents and the role of prevention programmes? These are some of the issues that needs further research and discussions at decision-making level.

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