

Alcohol consumption and masculine identity among young men

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Abstract

Concern about excessive alcohol consumption among young men demands an understanding of why some young men drink excessively while others do not. The aim of this study was to identify how young men's patterns of alcohol consumption are related to their beliefs about masculinity, and the importance of drinking to their masculine identities. Thirty-one individual interviews and five group discussions were conducted with an ethnically- and socioeconomically-diverse sample of men aged 18–21 living in London, England. Analysis revealed a variety of associations between masculinity and alcohol consumption. Some men believed that alcohol consumption is a marker of masculinity and behaved accordingly. Other men emphasised the importance of other behaviours to masculine identity. There was also evidence that men traded drinking competence with competence in other behavioural domains. The links between masculinity and health-related social behaviours such as drinking are not simple. Implications for health education and health promotion are discussed.

Keywords: *Masculinity, identity, alcohol, qualitative*

Introduction

There is widespread concern about the health and social consequences of alcohol consumption among young men (Rehm, Room, & Edwards, 2001; Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (PMSU), 2004). To the individual health consequences can be added the interpersonal, social and financial costs of excessive alcohol

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consumption (Rehm et al., 2001; PMSU, 2004). Much of the attention paid to young men's drinking behaviour has focused on binge drinking: exceeding daily guidelines for safe drinking (Department of Health, 2003) or drinking to get drunk. Binge drinking is by no means restricted to young men, but in the UK and other Western nations young adult men are more likely than other people to binge drink (Department of Health, 2003; de Visser, Rissel, Smith, & Richters, 2006; Kuntsche, Rehm, & Gmel, 2004). Excessive alcohol consumption among young men is a concern in its own right, and also because binge drinking during youth is a significant predictor of binge drinking during adulthood (Merline, O'Malley, Schulenberg, Bachman, & Johnston, 2004; Jefferis, Power, & Manor, 2005). Concern about excessive alcohol consumption among young men demands an understanding of why some young men drink excessively while other men drink moderately or not at all. Such information may facilitate the development of interventions to reduce excessive alcohol consumption and its associated health and social costs.

Contexts of drinking

Drinking behaviour is influenced by a range of demographic, social, and attitudinal variables. In ethnically- and culturally-diverse populations, such as the UK, it is important to consider how individual, peer, religious and cultural factors interact to influence men's alcohol consumption. For example, white British teenagers are more likely than their black and Asian peers to have ever drunk alcohol, and use alcohol regularly (Best et al., 2001; Denscombe, 1995; Karlsen, Rogers, & McCarthy, 1998). Other UK research reveals that youth drinking varies as a function of ethnicity and religion (Heim et al., 2004): Pakistani-British youth are less likely to drink than Indian-British or Chinese-British youth. Moreover, Muslim youth are less likely to drink than followers of other religions. However, there is an important interaction between ethnicity and religion: ethnic minority youth are more likely to drink if they have friends within their ethnic community who drink and/or friends outside their ethnic group (Heim et al., 2004). In a recent review of health risk behaviour, Thom (2003) noted that more research is needed to better understand the influence of religious and cultural factors, and the influence of socioeconomic factors. In the general population, binge drinking is associated with lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Moore, Smith, & Catford, 1994; Droomers, Schrijvers, Stronks, van de Mheen, & Mackenbach, 1999), and unemployment has been found to contribute to the development of problem drinking (Claussen, 1999). However, among young adults there is less consistent evidence for a link between measures of SES and binge drinking (Casswell, Pledger, & Hooper, 2003; de Visser et al., 2006; Measham, 1996; Muthén & Muthén, 2000), probably because these men are in a transitional phase when measures of SES are subject to change. In addition to these SES factors, previous research has highlighted the influence on alcohol consumption of peer influences (Kuntsche et al., 2004) and perceptions of peer drinking norms (Johnston & White, 2003). At the level of the individual, other

research has revealed how personality (Caspi et al., 1997; Kuntsche et al., 2004) and attitudes (Wardle & Steptoe, 2003) influence drinking and other health-related behaviours.

Gender is another potentially important line of enquiry which can be conceptualised at both an individual level and a social level. Research frequently examines sex differences (male/female) in drinking behaviour, but not gender differences (masculine/feminine). Such research cannot determine whether masculinity influences why some young men drink excessively while others do not. However, there is a need for such information, because gender is an important influence on health-related behaviours: traditional forms of masculinity are associated with poorer health outcomes (Courtenay, 2000; Lee & Owens, 2002). Although masculinity has been identified as an important influence on health-related behaviour, little is known about how ideologies of masculinity are enacted by *individual* men via *particular* behaviours within *particular* social contexts (Courtenay, 2000).

Masculine identities and health-related behaviour

Recent research has revealed that rather than there being one single masculinity, there exist several different ways of being masculine (Connell, 1995; Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002). Although different discourses of masculinity exist, many men endorse and aspire to 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1987, 1995), the dominant discourse of masculinity characterised by physical and emotional toughness, risk taking, predatory heterosexuality, being a breadwinner, and so on. Elements of hegemonic masculinity are commonly set up in binary opposition to their alternatives, so that anything other than the hegemonic form is immediately non-masculine (e.g., McQueen & Henwood, 2002; Robertson, 2003). The social behaviours that are evaluated as masculine or non-masculine include behaviours for which there are clear gender stereotypes (e.g., paid work, domestic labour), but they also include health-related behaviours. This idea is central to Courtenay's theory of gender and health:

“...health-related beliefs and behaviours, like other social practices that men and women engage in, are a means for demonstrating femininities and masculinities.”

(Courtenay, 2000, p. 1385)

Whether or not a man engages in particular health-related social behaviours such as alcohol consumption therefore has implications for his masculine identity. As a result, young men's definitions of drinking as masculine, and the importance to them of being considered to be masculine may influence their drinking behaviour. Indeed, one UK study revealed that drinking is an important element of young men's social lives and a measure of masculinity (Harnett, Thom, Herring, & Kelly, 2000). Respondents noted that “you've got to be a lad” (p. 71), and emphasised the importance of ‘keeping pace’ (p. 71) with their peers when drinking. However, the existence of non-hegemonic modes of masculinity makes it important to examine the links between different forms of masculinity and different patterns of alcohol consumption.

As masculinity can be displayed in a range of social domains via a range of behaviours, it is interesting to examine whether particular health-related behaviours can be used strategically in the development of a masculine identity. Research reveals that men may use 'masculine' behaviours such as sexual violence or economic crime to assert their masculine identities when such identities are challenged or questioned (Willott & Griffin, 1999; Messerschmidt, 2000). This suggests that if alcohol consumption is seen to be a masculine behaviour, then men who are insecure in their masculine identities may use alcohol consumption to demonstrate masculine competence. The interesting corollary of this situation is that men may be able to use competence in other masculine domains to excuse non-engagement in health compromising 'masculine' behaviours such as alcohol consumption. However, previous research has not examined the different ways in which alcohol may be used (or not used) in the construction of a masculine identity.

Little is known about why British young men drink, or the social and personal meanings they ascribe to drinking (Wright, 1999). Although much attention has been given to underage drinking (e.g., Best et al., 2001; Brain, 2000; Denscombe, 1995; Karlsen et al., 1998), there is a need for more information about drinking among young adult men. The analyses presented in this article came from a qualitative study with a broad focus on young men, masculinity and health-related behaviour. This study can be conceptualised as an application of Courtenay's (2000) theory of gender and health to a specific behaviour (alcohol consumption) within a specific population (young men in London, England). The aims were to: identify the ways in which young adult men's patterns of alcohol consumption are influenced by their beliefs about masculinity; examine the importance of drinking to men's thinking about masculinity; and examine men's experiences of associations between their masculine identities and their drinking behaviour.

Methods

Two sources of data were used: individual interviews and group discussions. The use of group discussions and individual interviews was planned so as to provide complementary data with different – but inseparable – objects of analysis: the group discussions were designed to identify the range of ideologies of masculinity and drinking available in the interviewees' social contexts; the individual interviews were designed to explore how individuals saw themselves in relation to the available ideologies, and how this was related to their drinking behaviour.

In-depth individual interviews were used to examine individual understandings of masculinity and alcohol consumption via discussion of personal experiences and patterns of alcohol consumption. The interviews commenced with a general discussion of how men spent their free time, before moving on to discuss a range of health-promoting and health-compromising behaviours, including alcohol consumption. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA: Smith, 1996) was used.

The aim in IPA is not simply to describe phenomena, but to examine cognitions and emotions underlying descriptions of subjective experiences (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Transcripts of interviews were coded and analysed on a case by case basis. Each transcript was read in full several times to give familiarity with the interview as a whole. Notes were then taken to reflect initial impressions made by different passages within the transcript. Further reading of the transcript and these notes enabled the identification of themes, which were clustered into superordinate themes. This process was completed for each interview and comparisons were then made between the different interviews.

An interest in subjective experience and meaning does not preclude the use of IPA to identify and examine social discourses. Rather, IPA's critical analytic approach can provide information about discourses shared within particular social contexts (e.g., Smith, 1996; Flowers, Hart, & Marriot, 1999). As the individual cannot be separated from society (e.g., Burkitt, 1991) a focus on subjective experience cannot help but reveal information about the individual's broader social context, including shared discourses. However, it was acknowledged that the examination of discourses might be better aided by employing methods such as group discussions that do not focus so much on personal experience.

Therefore group discussions were conducted to focus on shared or divergent understanding of issues such as masculinity and alcohol consumption and the links between masculinity and drinking. Participants were asked to define and discuss concepts such as 'masculinity' and 'health'. Discussion of these concepts was prompted by photographs of famous men, two of which are discussed in this article. Thematic analysis (Wilkinson, 1998) was used to identify ideologies of masculinity and drinking. The process of analysis was similar to the process used for the IPA of individual interviews. Transcripts were read in their entirety and coded individually to identify logically coherent themes relevant to ideologies of masculinity and alcohol consumption, and the links between the two. When individual transcripts had been coded, comparisons were made between transcripts to allow an analysis of shared and divergent understandings of the topics of interest.

The analyses of data from the individual interviews and group discussions were combined. Although the use of individual interviews and group discussions was planned so as to provide complementary data with different linked objects of analysis (subjective experience and social ideologies), in practice both objects of analysis were discussed in both settings. Subjective experience and identity were discussed in both the individual interviews *and* the group discussions. Similarly, ideologies of masculinity and drinking were discussed in both the group discussions *and* the individual interviews. Indeed, it was apparent that men could not refer to their own experiences and identities without making reference to social ideologies (see also Burkitt, 1991). The group discussions and individual interviews produced very similar responses: each of the emergent themes was apparent in both sets of transcripts. Thus although the two modes of data

collection differed, the broad analytic strategy, the types of responses, and the emergent themes did not.

Participants

For both modes of data collection, the samples consisted of men aged 18–21 living in London, England. A sample diverse in both class and ethnicity was recruited via stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Men with higher SES/opportunity were recruited via notices on two university campuses in central London. Men with lower SES/opportunity were recruited via advertisements placed in employment centres and a local newspaper in an area of inner east London characterised by high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage (based on infant mortality, adult and youth unemployment, proportion of population receiving government benefits) and a substantial non-white population (Greater London Authority, 2002). The sample included similar numbers of students and un(der)employed men. Half were white, and there were equal numbers of black and Asian men. Respondents were not recruited for a study of drinking, but a study of social lives and health. Thus, there is no reason to assume that respondents had unusual patterns of alcohol consumption or unusual orientations towards hegemonic masculinity.

Semi-structured in-depth individual interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were conducted with 31 men. The sample included 17 students and 14 un(der)employed men. The ethnic breakdown was 15 white, 8 black, and 8 Asian men. Five group discussions lasting around 90 minutes were conducted involving 27 men, 13 of whom also completed individual interviews. Of these five groups, two consisted of university students, two consisted of un(der)employed men, and one contained both students and un(der)employed men. As for the individual interviews, the sample for the group discussions was also ethnically diverse. Participants gave written informed consent. Interviews and group discussions were facilitated by a male researcher and recorded on minidisc. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, with names and other identifiers replaced with pseudonyms.

Analysis

Three major themes were identified: “equation of drinking with masculinity”; “trading masculine competence”; and “no link between masculinity and drinking”. Discussion of these three themes is followed by discussion of the impact of ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic opportunity on masculine identity and drinking behaviour.

Equation of drinking with masculinity

Most respondents acknowledged that drinking, and drinking large amounts of alcohol, is generally equated with masculinity. Participants in the group discussions were asked how masculinity is defined by young men.

The following response from a group of Asian students neatly sums up what was also said in other groups:

Arjuna: I think masculinity...if you're, if you're in university that is, sort of, the drinking culture, the casual sex, and the drug taking I suppose.

Adi: Yeah.

Rahul: I mean, you just look at...like, popular culture kind of things and movies and things like that. If you just take certain characters who are regarded as... –

Arjuna: - Icons –

Rahul: – really icons of masculinity who go out and booze, and get in fights, and get lots of women and stuff like that, they are regarded as... the prime kind of, you know, specimens of maleness.

Arjuna: And guys get, kind of, ranked or split into categories on how well they can handle their drink, how they are with the ladies, how much drugs they take.

Key elements of masculinity identified by study participants include drinking, drug use, sex, and fighting. Young men are competitive in these domains, and rank their performances: the more they drink, the more highly they are regarded. In an individual interview, Tim (white, student) noted that “there’s a lot of machoness about, about drinking”, emphasising that men who drink a lot feel more masculine and are regarded as more masculine than other men.

The importance of drinking for masculinity was also noted by un(der)employed men. In an individual interview Charles (black, unemployed), who drank moderate amounts of alcohol, described the importance of drinking to masculine identity:

Int: Is there ever anything made of the fact that they're drinking bigger amounts or that you don't drink as much?

Charles: Yeah. Some of them, like, they'll just, they'll do it to show that they're, like... they will just have a drink just to show that they're got bigger balls, yeah. Like, they will just do it so that they can show that they're better than everyone else. But the reason that they're better than everyone else is because they can drink more than everyone else.

Charles' use of the term 'bigger balls' links drinking competence to masculinity by alluding to masculine sexual potency. Lester (black, unemployed) noted that men must not only drink, but be able to hold their drink. He emphasised the links between drinking and having a good time, and not spoiling this fun by throwing up or passing out. Lack of competence as a drinker will result in ridicule:

Lester: There's an expectation to drink and get drunk, or to drink and, like, have a good time. Maybe not to be roaring drunk or whatever in the corner, but yeah, there is an expectation to drink, and to be able to hold your drink as well.

Int: Yeah. So holding your drink –

Lester: – is important.

Int: What, um, what would happen if you couldn't hold your drink? What would the kind of response be, do you think?

Lester: Um, taking the piss out of you for throwing up, or falling asleep, or whatever.

Although men did mention consuming wine and spirits, there was a general consensus that beer drinking was central to masculine alcohol consumption. Andrew (white, student) said “When I say ‘a drink’ I mean a pint”, and Charles (black, unemployed) said “When I say ‘a drink’, I mean like . . . a series of pints”. Most men who drank noted that the majority of their alcohol consumption was beer, with other forms of alcohol consumed less often. Beer drinking is a key element of white British ‘lad culture’ practised by many men and celebrated in popular culture. In the extract below, Scott (white, unemployed) celebrates lad culture:

Scott . . . it’s great to have this, ah, this sense of lad culture. This sense of . . . drinking heavily [. . .] pubs, drinking lager, the football. All that’s associated with it.

Although they were less likely to endorse lad culture, white students highlighted the importance of drinking beer for perceptions of masculinity:

Tim: If there was a guy in first year or something who doesn’t drink beer it’d be like . . . either he’s gay or he’s –

Marco: – It’s quite –

Jack: – Probably.

Charlie: We were in the Union last night, weren’t we, and because wine was cheapest we were drinking wine.

Jack: We were drinking wine.

Charlie: But it felt like . . . not masculine.

Not only is drinking wine rather than beer non-masculine, but such behaviour may lead to questioning of masculinity in other domains – men who do not drink beer may be suspected of being homosexual. This suggests that although there are several domains in which masculine competence can be displayed, non-masculine behaviour in one domain may lead to a more general perception of non-masculinity. Thus, as suggested in the introduction, men’s drinking behaviour has implications for their masculine identities. However, some men noted that the potential evaluation of a man as less masculine because he does not drink can be countered by exemplary performance in other masculine domains. This second theme of trading masculine competence is discussed in the next section.

Trading masculine competence

Participants in group discussions were shown a colour magazine advertisement for a non-alcoholic sports drink which showed English Rugby Union star Jonny Wilkinson drinking the advertised product with the ironic caption ‘Like most rugby players, Jonny Wilkinson is a big drinker’. The text is ironic because Wilkinson does not drink alcohol, thereby not conforming to the stereotype of the masculine beer drinking rugby player. Participants debated whether Wilkinson’s abstinence affected his masculinity:

Will: But do you think Jonny Wilkinson is any less of a man because he doesn’t drink? I mean, he’s a national hero!

Jack: He’s still a one trick pony.

Will: He didn't have a pint in the pub after he won the World Cup.

Tim: Yeah, that's a bit lame I think.

Charlie: But he's got a really fit girlfriend.

Tim: Yeah, he's got other things, which kind of lifts him back up again.

In the extract above, Will suggested that even though Wilkinson did not join his team-mates for a celebratory beer following their World Cup victory, his masculinity cannot be questioned because of his sporting success. Charlie adds that the fact that he has an attractive girlfriend further emphasises his masculinity, rebutting any claims that his abstinence diminishes his masculinity. However, Tim's second remark neatly points to how Wilkinson's non-masculine abstinence is excused or allowed by his masculine competence in other domains – on the Rugby field and having an attractive girlfriend – it 'lifts him back up again'. Thus it appears that masculine competence can be traded to compensate for lack of competence or a disinclination to engage in certain masculine behaviours.

This process of trading competence was also described by Rahul (Asian, student) who, like Jonny Wilkinson, was able to use sporting prowess to compensate for a 'non-masculine' disinclination towards drinking:

Rahul: ...because I was better than most of the players, they didn't, like, pressure me into drinking, because...you know, it was kind of like I could say to them 'Forget it', or whatever. Um...that was, that's personally me, but then I have friends who...weren't quite as experienced as me at hockey, but just to kind of get into the group I think they felt the need to partake in that.

Int: *Mm-hm. So you were kind of able to...because of the skill and being a good hockey player, there wasn't so much pressure to?*

Rahul: Pretty much, yeah.

Here Rahul describes how his masculine sporting competence made it less likely that others would construe his disinclination to drink excessively as evidence of non-masculinity. However, he noted that men who are less good athletes may try to compensate for this by gaining credit in the pub.

Trading of masculine competence was further examined when group participants were shown a photo of Will Young, the openly gay winner of the UK Pop Idol competition. The photo – taken from a magazine fashion special – showed Young wearing a £190 shirt and £215 trousers and holding a half-empty bottle of expensive champagne. The initial response in most groups was reference to Young's sexuality, with the addition that he is not masculine because he is gay, and that it is not masculine to model clothes or be too concerned with one's appearance. One example comes from a group discussion involving white students and unemployed men:

Sean: Poof!

Chris: Poof!

[...]

Marcus: I think being obsessed with your image is a very unmasculine thing. It's...I don't know, it's seen as feminine.

However, some men noted that if they did not know that Young was gay they would say that he is portraying a particular form of sophisticated heterosexual masculinity – the playboy:

Arjuna: If you didn't know who he was –

Adi: – He looks like a bit of a ladies man, actually –

Arjuna: – yeah, you would think he was a bit of a ladies man. The fact of the matter is when you see him on TV you can tell he is camp. You may not know he is gay, but you can tell he was camp, which in my mind that lowers his masculinity.

[. . .]

Rahul: Sometimes when you go to a big club and stuff there's always somebody like that, wandering around with some nice pretty girls with a bottle of champagne, and that . . . in its own way is a masculine, kind of, gesture.

In this interpretation of the image, masculinity is linked to financial success and heterosexual competence. Thus, although this was a potentially masculine image, most men noted that the combination of Young's homosexuality, a concern with appearance and the consumption of champagne (rather than beer) made it non-masculine:

Tim: It is a bit gay that he's standing there with a bottle of champagne. I mean, if he had a pint of lager in his hand, then it would be a really different perception that you would have of him.

Charlie: That's true. That's true.

It is likely that respondents' knowledge of Young's sexuality and his source of fame (pop music rather than rap, rock, sport, or action movies) influenced their perceptions of his masculinity. Therefore, they were asked to imagine the same photograph, but with England football captain David Beckham's face in the place of Young's. Beckham's sporting prowess allows him to lead a glamorous lifestyle. He, like Young, is very conscious of his appearance and uses changes in style – hairstyles, sarongs, nail varnish, etc. – to attract media attention:

Int: So what if that was, what if that was David Beckham's head on that picture, with everything else the same?

Adi: You'd be pretty much –

Rahul: – Yeah, but that's why I don't think it's – Look at David Beckham, he wears skirts and stuff like that and does his hair in braids and stuff. How can you class him [Beckham] as more masculine than him [Young]?

Adi: Well it's not, again, it only comes back to where he –

Rahul: – His perception is because he –

Adi: – It's because David Beckham plays football.

As Beckham's reason for fame is football (masculine), and because he is heterosexual (masculine), his non-masculine focus on his appearance can be excused. In contrast, being a gay pop singer is not seen to be masculine. From the discussions of Jonny Wilkinson, Will Young and David Beckham, and Rahul's description of his own behaviour, it is apparent that competence in one traditionally masculine domain may be used to excuse non-masculine behaviour in other domains, but that it may not be possible to compensate for all

non-masculine behaviours (e.g. homosexuality). However, it is important to note that the patterns of behaviour associated with 'trading masculine competence' still entail an acceptance that drinking is linked to masculinity. The third theme differed from the first and second because it involved a rejection of the importance of alcohol consumption for masculine identity.

No link between masculinity and drinking

Several men – some of whom drank, but most of whom did not – presented an alternative mode of masculinity in which drinking is not valorised, and in which individuality, rationality, and integrity are deemed to be more important determinants of masculinity. For example, in the group discussion extract below, Emeka notes the importance of individuality and independence as key elements of his masculine identity:

Int: ... do you think that affects your impression of how masculine he [Wilkinson] is as a non-drinker?

Emeka: No. Because I don't drink, and I feel as masculine as the next guy who does. I feel even more masculine, because I feel that I'm not succumbing to pressure.

Patrick: Yeah.

Emeka: And I'm being independent whereas they're just doing it because, like, it's seen as, like, they're just copying the trends. Whereas I can take a stand and say "No, I don't". So I can feel more masculine being a non-drinker.

However, Emeka (black, student) echoed statements made by Rahul and about Jonny Wilkinson. He noted that his abstinence would not be as easily excused if he was not a better football player than most of his peers. In an individual interview, Emeka emphasised how important integrity and resisting peer pressure are to his masculine identity:

Emeka: [My friend] never used to drink when he was, like – Because he went off to university, but before he went to university he never used to drink. And then one time when I went to visit him... he was knocking back pints like he was a pro. And I asked him 'What? Do you drink now?' And he was like 'Yeah.' And I was like 'Why?' And he was just 'Well, just everyone around me was just drinking and I just felt, like, left out.' So he said he started drinking just because of that. And I was thinking, like, 'What a fool!'

Emeka suggested that an immature or insecure masculinity is linked to excessive alcohol consumption. Najib (Asian, student), another non-drinker, noted the importance of individuality and integrity, but also emphasised public decency as an important element of masculinity – a marker distinguishing men from boys:

Najib: Why do you have to be like, you know, like a sheep and follow everyone, you know. Does it have to be like that? I know... it's not me trying to be different, it's just me seeing stuff in a different sort of... form, I'd say. It's like I don't see that as a norm – I don't find that a decent way to be, going out, getting drunk. I don't find that to be decent.

However, Najib noted that his position with respect to alcohol did expose him to social criticism. He noted that if he tells new acquaintances that he does not drink “they’ll give you a strange look, like ‘you don’t drink – Are you gay?’” Thus, his personal experience matches the statements reported earlier whereby abstinence leads to questioning of masculinity in other domains, especially sexuality. Later in the interview, Najib noted that having been born and raised in Britain he is influenced by two cultures, but that he values more his Asianness than his Britishness:

Najib: I’ve got the choice. I can either be, you know, culturally follow my parents, and... be the Asian, or be the, um... the... British side of me, which I am, because I’m British obviously, but, um that, get that British side out more, and you know go out, get drunk, you know, you know, and show my bum to the world on the tube and stuff. [laughs]

Here, Najib referred to the white British ‘lad culture’ mentioned earlier. He suggested that he could act more in accordance with his ‘British’ identity, but his reference to lad culture was inherently negative, and associated with antisocial behaviour. Najib also emphasised his agency in being able to choose whether or not to drink.

Although he had an Islamic family background, Najib was not a devout Muslim. Umaru (black, unemployed) noted that his Islamic faith did influence his decision to drink moderately so as to limit the detrimental effects of excessive alcohol consumption. He noted that a rational man would not expose himself to harm by drinking excessively:

Umaru: I like to drink now. But a lot of people drink, and a lot of people drink large consumptions.

Int: Yeah.

Umaru: Like, it’s not a... like, yeah.. I just find that weird because... you know, why do you want to do that to your body? Why do you want to... whatever, because I just find that really weird.

Int: I mean, what is it – When you said that it’s a bit weird for people to be out drinking that much, I mean, what is it that you find weird about that?

Umaru: It’s like that the same people, like, the same people that smoke. It’s like, you are damaging your body but for what, for what reason?

Like Umaru, Azim (black, unemployed) described the influence of his Islamic beliefs on his behaviour, but he gave greater importance to his faith, and he did not drink:

Azim: I’m a Muslim guy, you know, and if you are Muslim you are not allowed to drink. And I’m a guy that, you know, I pray, you know. I pray and so I don’t drink. I never, I never tried to drink either.

Muslim men such as Emeka and Azim stressed the importance of individual choice and responsibility for one’s actions. Although his religious beliefs shape his behaviour, ultimately Azim – a rational, decent, mature man rather than a boy – is responsible for his behaviour.

The men described above endorsed an alternative form of masculinity that was still based on traditionally ‘masculine’ characteristics such as rationality and independence. All of these men rejected a link between alcohol consumption and masculinity: they were all non-drinkers or moderate drinkers who emphasised the importance of other “masculine” characteristics and behaviours. Other men, such as Julian (white, student), had also rejected traditional forms of masculinity and the association between alcohol consumption and masculinity, but continued to drink. Julian’s patterns of alcohol consumption would be classified as binge drinking, but he actively distanced himself from ‘manly men’, such as those referred to under themes one and two, and who equated drinking with masculinity:

Julian: Ah, I’m not a very manly man, really. Like . . . it doesn’t really grab me. It just seems a bit ludicrous to me, frankly. Um . . . not that I’m saying . . . you know, it is just another choice that people make, but I wouldn’t make that choice myself.

Int: Yeah. It’s interesting that you said ‘I’m not a manly man’ –

Julian: – Yeah –

Int: – I mean, how would you describe a manly man?

Julian: Um . . . I don’t, I’m not, I’m not an alpha male, really, like the just, sort of, really loud and dominating man. I am quite thoughtful and quite intuitive. And I have quite a lot of feminine attributes. Ah . . . rather than being . . . highly dominant, macho . . . keen to assert myself, and those things . . . like being competitive.

Ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic opportunity

In the discussion above, religious beliefs and cultural practices emerged as important influences on the drinking behaviour of many men. White British men were more likely than their black and Asian counterparts to endorse the link between masculinity and consumption of alcohol (especially beer). Very few white men were non-drinkers or moderate drinkers. Although no claim can be made that the study participants are representative of all young men, this difference between white men and their black and Asian peers was striking:

Umaru: A lot of English or British boys and men like beer, and all that . . . it’s just a traditional thing to drink beer or some form of alcohol.

Some black and Asian men did drink excessively – Sonny (Asian, student) said “I like getting hammered” – and many noted that alcohol consumption is an important resource for the development and display of a masculine identity. However, black and Asian men were more likely to question a link between masculinity and drinking. Although ethnicity in itself is one way to understand difference in patterns of drinking, it was also apparent that religion – especially Islamic beliefs – strongly influenced whether men associated alcohol consumption with masculinity. This was evident in the accounts of Azim and other Muslim men.

In contrast to the clear ethnic/religious differences noted above there were few obvious differences in current drinking behaviour related to SES.

However, one clear SES difference was that university students generally saw their current patterns of alcohol consumption as being time limited, and part of ‘university culture’ and ‘student lifestyles’:

Tim: I’m sure that in a couple of years time I won’t have the chance to, ah... be living the lifestyle that I am at the moment in terms of going out and things like that. So... I’d prefer to live it now, and then, you know, calm down in a couple of years.

Students such as Tim (white, student) and Andrew (white, student) recognised that their current patterns of alcohol consumption would have to change in the near future, as they would not be compatible with the responsibilities of professional life:

Andrew: You know, you can miss a lecture here and there, but you can’t miss work.

In contrast, unemployed men who drank were unlikely to view their current patterns of behaviour as something that would change dramatically in the near future because of their work or careers.

Some students noted that markers of masculinity vary at different ages. As indicated above, many participants noted that the importance of alcohol consumption for masculine identities can change with age and that other behaviours may come to be more important masculine identity resources:

Arjuna: Like, say you’re in school, the more masculine you are is how well you can handle yourself, how hard you are. And I think at university those three ranks, drinking, sport, and girls, you can probably pin it down on those. And then when you go to work I think –

Rahul: – It’s more like how much money you can pull in –

Arjuna: – how much money you can pull in –

Rahul: – or how nice a car you drive –

Arjuna: – the people, the people, the social circles you hang around in.

Rahul: Yeah. Yeah, I think you’re right, that the older you get –

Arjuna: – the boundaries change –

Rahul: – at different stages the criteria change.

These students outlined the ways in which the important resources for displaying masculine competence change from physical capacities in youth to professional and economic capacities in adulthood. It is noteworthy that unemployed men did not talk in the same ways about changes in resources for masculine identity. Chris (white, unemployed) noted that he and his unemployed friends drank because they had nothing else to do. He suggested that having something to do (i.e., school or work) was a major counter to drinking – work reduces the time available for drinking, and also restricts alcohol consumption, because men have to avoid being too hungover to work. One implication of this suggestion is that unemployment at any stage may be associated with excessive alcohol consumption, because it is a way to fill in time:

Chris: Because I’m not doing nothing... I want to smoke [cannabis] or I want a drink. But if I were working or when I was at college I would only have a joint before

I went to bed...and like with drinking, because I'm doing something in between with those hours, I've got something to do what's keeping me occupied.

The concept 'trading masculine competence' suggests that as well as drinking to fill in time, unemployed men may use alcohol consumption to display masculine competence in the absence of opportunities to do this in the labour force: men whose masculinity is compromised by unemployment may attempt to demonstrate their masculinity via drinking.

Discussion

Recent studies of masculinity and social behaviour suggest that health-related behaviours such as alcohol consumption may be an important resource in the social construction of a masculine identity (Connell, 1987, 1995; Courtenay, 2000). Indeed, this study revealed that many men believe that drinking and being able to 'hold your drink' are important components of masculinity. Other men had strong masculine identities that were characterised by an explicit reference to not drinking or drinking in moderation. Still others drank excessively without endorsing traditional masculinity.

This study revealed three major themes relating to alcohol consumption and masculinity. The first theme "equation of drinking with masculinity" described how many men equate masculinity with particular patterns of alcohol consumption – i.e., drinking beer, being able to drink a lot. The second theme "trading masculine competence" was aligned with the first theme as it linked masculinity to alcohol consumption, but addressed the ways in which alcohol consumption relates to competence in other 'masculine' domains. The third theme "no link between masculinity and drinking" differed from the first two themes, being characterised by a resistance to associations between masculinity and drinking, and a focus on other masculine characteristics. Each of these themes was illuminated by interviewees' descriptions of their subjective experiences. For example, the theme of 'trading masculine competence' was examined via the images of Jonny Wilkinson and Will Young, and was further illuminated by Rahul's description of his own experiences. The combination of group discussions and individual interviews allowed different perspectives on the relationship between alcohol consumption and masculine identity among young men.

The theme 'trading masculine competence' is important because it has clear implications for health education and health promotion. Rahul and Emeka noted that the esteem gained from being a good athlete made it easier to resist pressure to drink, while still maintaining a masculine identity. The corollary of this position is that some men may use excessive alcohol consumption in efforts to enhance their masculine status. This process echoes the findings in previous research that men may turn to unhealthy and/or antisocial masculine behaviours if other means of gaining 'masculine' credit are not available

(Willott & Griffin, 1999; Messerschmidt, 2000). The finding that men use masculine competence in domains such as sport to excuse a disinclination towards drinking suggests that encouraging healthy 'masculine' behaviours such as sport will provide health benefits, and may also reduce the potential harms associated with alternative health-compromising behaviours used for constructing masculine identities. However, it should be recognised that such an approach encourages individuality and competitiveness rather than collective action to improve men's health. In addition, it is important to note that such an approach reinforces, rather than challenges, the gendering of health-related behaviours.

It is important to note that although some respondents equated not drinking with homosexuality, population-based surveys reveal that it is not true that homosexual men are less likely than their heterosexual peers to report harmful levels of alcohol consumption (Cochran, Keenan, Schober, & Mays, 2000; de Visser et al., 2006; Drabble, Midanik, & Trocki, 2005). It is also important to consider not only patterns of alcohol consumption, but also the type of alcohol. Indeed, some participants suggested that perceptions of Will Young would have differed had he been holding a pint of beer rather than a bottle of champagne. Although this study did not specifically recruit only heterosexual young men, none of the participants identified as homosexual or bisexual. It was therefore not possible to examine how sexuality interacted with masculinity and alcohol consumption. Further research with homosexual and bisexual young men could enhance our understanding of the links between masculinity and alcohol consumption.

Some men in the current study rejected associations between masculinity and drinking, and instead endorsed a strong masculinity characterised by rationality, health, integrity, free thought, and resisting social pressure. Studies in other sociocultural contexts reveal that young men can develop a strong masculine identity while at the same time rejecting 'masculine' behaviours such as binge drinking, drug use, and predatory heterosexuality. For example, within the North American 'straightedge' youth subculture, the 'masculine' characteristics of rationality and control are favoured, while the 'masculine' behaviours of drinking, smoking, drug use, and promiscuous sex are denied and avoided (Wood, 2003).

It is important to note that the men who talked about trading competence and men who rejected alcohol consumption as a component of masculinity were acutely aware of the common equation of drinking with masculinity. As noted in the introduction (Connell, 1987, 1995; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; McQueen & Henwood, 2002; Robertson, 2003), alternative modes of masculinity exist with reference to the hegemonic form, regardless of whether they are complicit with hegemonic masculinity (e.g., trading competence) or resistant to hegemonic masculinity (e.g., rejecting alcohol). However, once men identify with or endorse a particular mode of masculinity, they must act accordingly. Thus, men who believe that drinking is important for masculinity must drink, and drink in the appropriate ways, whereas men who reject alcohol as an important masculine behaviour must not drink.

There were few differences in the observed associations between masculinity and drinking behaviour along the lines of SES. This is what one might expect among young men, because SES differences are difficult to measure and examine among young people (Gallo & Matthews, 2003). Measures of education, employment, and income in young adulthood may not be particularly meaningful, because they accurately reflect neither family background nor adult destinations. Both students and un(der)employed men have limited financial resources. It would be illuminating to examine whether the findings of this study would hold among young men in full time employment. Such comparisons would be interesting given the suggestion of some students that resources for the display of masculine competence change upon entry to the workforce.

Like men in other studies, both students and un(der)employed men noted the ways in which work obligations constrain opportunities for drinking (Brain, 2000). Although there were no clear SES differences in the association between masculinity and drinking, there were clear differences along the lines of ethnicity and religion. White men were more likely than black and Asian men to equate drinking with masculinity. However, ethnicity did not in itself account for differences in beliefs about masculinity and alcohol consumption. Religious beliefs also influenced men's beliefs about masculinity and alcohol consumption. In particular, Muslim men were the most likely to question links between masculinity and drinking, and were also more likely to drink moderately or abstain. The data presented in this article were gathered from men in a particular sociocultural context. The associations between masculinity and alcohol consumption – and the influence of SES, ethnicity and religion – may be different in other contexts.

This study was designed to collect two data sources which had different – but inseparable – objects of analysis. The focus on ideologies in the group discussions was complemented by a focus on individual deployment of these ideologies and the links subjectivity. In practice, men discussed both social ideologies and subjective experiences in both the group discussions and the individual interviews. As noted earlier, although the two modes of data collection differed, the analytic approach to each source of data was similar and produced very similar responses. In this study the combination of research methods gave a fuller understanding of: (a) the links between masculinity and drinking at the level of social ideologies and (b) the links between masculinity and drinking at the level of subjective experience.

Although masculinity may be conceptualised as a problem because of links between hegemonic masculinity and excessive alcohol consumption, academics, health professionals, the media, and the general public should resist the urge to equate (young) masculinity with excessive alcohol consumption. This study shows that although particular modes of masculinity are linked to excessive alcohol consumption, other forms of masculinity are linked to abstinence or moderate alcohol consumption. There is more than one way to be masculine (Connell, 1995; Frosh et al., 2002).

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that links between masculinity and health-related social behaviours such as drinking are not simple. In accordance with previous research, a diverse range of factors including individual personality and beliefs, peer behaviour, ethnicity, and religion influence whether masculinity is associated with excessive alcohol consumption (Best et al., 2001; Caspi et al., 1997; Heim et al., 2004; Johnston & White, 2003; Kuntsche et al., 2004; Wardle & Steptoe, 2003). This study revealed that within a socioeconomically- and ethnically-diverse sample of men aged 18–21 living in London there was a range of orientations towards hegemonic masculinity and alcohol consumption. Masculinity can be defined and enacted in different ways. It is not necessarily linked to unhealthy behaviour. Indeed, it is possible to draw an analogy between masculinity and alcohol. Used in particular ways, alcohol has health benefits (White, 1999): used inappropriately or excessively, it has clear detrimental effects (Rehm et al., 2001; PMSU, 2004). Similarly, it is *how* young men define and use their masculinity (rather than how masculine they feel) that determines whether it will harm or benefit their health. The challenge for harm reduction strategies (e.g. PMSU, 2004) is to help men from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to develop masculine identities that do not entail harmful behaviours such as excessive alcohol consumption.

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