“I don’t really care about what someone else’s studied”: Drinking guidelines and the government of pleasure.

By

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Abstract

This paper examines data from a Drinkwise Australia funded research project that investigated the cultural drivers of drinking in 14-24 year-old Australians. The research included two studies. In one we conducted interviews and focus groups with administrators and young people in a range of sporting clubs and in the other we interviewed 60 young people aged 20-24 about their drinking biographies. The drinking biographies study is the focus of this paper. At the time of interviewing the draft guidelines on low-risk drinking were released by the NH&MRC and we asked our participants what they knew about them and if they would affect their drinking patterns. The responses to these questions are examined in light of O’Malley and Valverde’s claim that pleasure is silenced and/or deployed strategically in liberal governance discourses about drugs and alcohol (2004: 25). This is despite the fact that research indicates that pleasure is an important motivation for drinking.

Key Words: Pleasure, liberal governance, drinking cultures, alcohol, risk
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In 2007 colleagues from Monash University and Deakin University and myself were awarded a tender by Drinkwise Australia to investigate the cultural drivers of drinking in 14-24 year old Australians. This project was divided into two phases: research into Victorian Sporting Clubs and a Drinking Biographies Study. This paper reports on aspects of the second phase of our research.

“What a great night”: The cultural drivers of drinking in 14-24 year-old Australians

In the Drinking Biographies Study we conducted sixty individual in-depth interviews with drinkers in the 20-24 year old age group (20 from Melbourne, 20 from Geelong and 20 from Warrnambool, half male/half female in each location). These young people were asked to reflect on their induction into drinking cultures including where and how they learned to drink. We asked questions designed to elicit understandings about how they define different types of drinking and we gathered information about changing drinking patterns over time and what cultural drivers propelled them into stages of high risk or low risk drinking as well as information about links between alcohol consumption and study, work and leisure. The data provides insights into risk taking and changing leisure and consumption landscapes for young people.

At the time we were preparing interview schedules the National Health and Medical Research Council released draft guidelines for low risk drinking (October 2007). Because of this we decided to ask participants what they thought of the proposed new
The responses made by these young people to this question are the focus of this paper.

**Methods**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a mixture of open ended and forced response questions. The interviews were conducted at a time and place suited to participants and were between 45 minutes to more than an hour in duration. They were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were then coded for demographic data and themes using NVivo qualitative research software. These initial themes arose from both the data and a preceding literature review.

**Governing Pleasure**

Pat O’Malley and Mariana Valverde point out that there is a silence about ‘pleasure as a motive for consumption’ in governmental discourses about drugs and alcohol, instead these discourses focus on ‘consumption characterised by compulsion, pain and pathology’ (2004: 26). In relation to this they claim that factors such as ‘experimentation, peer group pressure, mood altering influences, family influences, cultural influence, availability, advertising and religion’ are seen as factors affecting consumption without any mention of ‘pleasure, enjoyment or excitement’ (p. 26). Interestingly these were the very factors we explored in our own project when trying to determine the cultural drivers of drinking. The title of the project “What a great night” from a recent song by the Australian group *Hilltop Hoods* was our attempt to recognise the pleasure involved in alcohol consumption, readily acknowledged in popular cultural messages. Counter to popular cultural messages consumption in
liberal governance discourses is premised on ‘rational moderation’ so that ‘once alcohol consumption is rendered problematic, so too is enjoyment’ (2004: 26).

Within liberal governance discourses pleasure and rationality are ‘foundationally linked’ (O’Malley and Valverde, 2008: 27) associated as they are with ‘free’ subjects who are required to be responsible, rational, reasonable and independent.

**Australian alcohol guidelines for low-risk drinking**

In October 2007 the NH&MRC released draft guidelines for low-risk drinking superseding the previous guidelines released in 2001. In the new edition ‘risky’ and high risk’ drinking are not mentioned as ‘Any drinking above the guideline levels …carries a higher risk than not drinking…’ (2007:18), thus effectively increasing the parameters of ‘riskiness’. The term ‘binge-drinking’ is avoided because ‘its meaning is ill defined and unclear’ (2007:19). However later in this document we are told that ‘alcohol affects brain development in young people; thus, drinking, particularly binge-drinking, at any time before brain development is complete (which is not until 25 years of age) may adversely affect later brain function’ (2007: 70, emphasis added). The focus in these guidelines is on the reduction of accident or injury and development of alcohol related diseases and reduction in the lifetime risk of death from alcohol-related injury (2007:9). This is consistent with the harm minimization approach to health promotion that the guidelines are premised on. The universal recommendation for low risk drinking is two standard drinks or less in any one day. Young people in the 20-29 year age group are identified in this document as having the ‘riskiest drinking profile’ (2007: 34).
Information is provided so that people can ‘objectively’ assess their level of risk at the same time as acknowledging that different groups in Australia will have different views about what is ‘sensible’ or ‘responsible’ drinking (2007: 25). In fact, there are considerable variations in Alcohol guidelines across Western countries (2007: 82) with many non-Western countries having no guidelines at all.

There is only a short reference to the ‘social and psychological benefits of alcohol’ in relation to ‘enhanced creativity and a therapeutic value in times of stress’ (2007: 28), immediately followed by a list of the harmful effects that increase exponentially with any increase in alcohol intake. The remainder of this section in the guidelines concentrates on alcohol related diseases and susceptibility to alcohol. The word *pleasure* in relation to alcohol consumption is never mentioned.

**The nanny state has spoken? Public responses to the guidelines**
The media of course has had a field day since the draft guidelines were released. Janet Albrechtsen, a reporter for the Melbourne *Age* (June 15: 2008), as one example, accused bureaucrats of ‘reducing us to the status of children’ and setting down rules ‘that end up neutering our ability to take personal responsibility for our actions’. Albrechtsen confesses to being a binge-drinker as her alcohol intake is usually more than the two drinks in one sitting recommended. Despite the NH&MRC eschewing the term binge-drinking, because there is no consensus about what this means, it is still frequently used in public discourses. Towards the end of this article Albrechtson sounded a warning that when ‘health guidelines are set at patently unreasonable levels, it might just mean people stop listening to these bodies about anything they have to say’. Public responses on Tim Dunlop’s Blog (June 16, 2008) variously
accuse the government of governing families when they should be governing the country, or practising social engineering and the guidelines as ensuring that everyone will ignore the subject – ‘now it’s going to be filed away alongside margarine, eggs, white bread etc etc etc…’. Perhaps unsurprisingly a submission by representatives of the alcohol industry (11 December 2007) challenged the science of the draft guidelines, and stressed the importance of taking into account the ‘prevailing drinking culture of a population’ if public health messages were to be respected (2007: 4).

It is not surprising then that reference to pleasure is absent from the proposed drinking guidelines. The harm minimization approach (Youth Research Centre, 1995) that the guidelines focus necessarily on harms and risks – mention of ‘inappropriate’ pleasure (hedonistic, fun, enjoyable) could undo the work that this risk discourse seeks to do. Pleasure in the liberal governance sense is to be found in the exercise of control and in drinking in moderation, behaviours that are necessary in order to comply with these ‘guidelines’. Albrechtsen’s references to infantilisation and the nanny state are quite consistent with the ‘free’ subject of liberal governance who is capable of being, and even compelled to be, rational, reasonable and responsible. Telling people what they should be doing implies they can’t ‘do the right thing’ of their own volition.

Having briefly mapped the territory in terms of the governance of pleasure within harm minimization discourses such as the new ‘low-risk’ drinking guidelines, I turn now to an examination of our participants’ reactions to these.

“Like no-one drinks two glasses of anything”: Young people’s reactions to the drinking guidelines
NVivo coding for ‘guidelines, education and policy’ elicited 20 useable male responses and 29 useable female responses (out of 60 participants). Two young women and one young man who had undergone ‘Responsible Drinking’ courses were aware of the guidelines and indicated that they adhered to them. Two young women and one young man thought that they may affect them and the rest said that they would have no affect on their drinking patterns. Most of the participants were aware that there were guidelines but confused these with the .05 driving limits in Victoria or were unsure what the recommended amounts were. Many only drank on weekends and did not see themselves as the ‘subject’ of this discourse. Typical responses were; “I wouldn’t drink more than two a day, I might drink like six or seven in one night, but I wouldn’t do it like every day” (Female, Melbourne, Interview #19); “…more than two standard drinks a day, that’d apply if people drank every day wouldn’t it? So I just have them all in one day” (Male, Warrnambool, Interview #13). Others saw the two-drink limit as a bit of a joke: [laughs] Because they’re so unrealistic. Like no one drinks two glasses of anything a day except my dad” (Female, Melbourne, Interview #8).

The ‘Free Subject’ of Liberal Governance

Within harm minimisation choice and risk appear as ‘parallel but distinct terms’ and the subject of this discourse is ‘imagined as a choice-maker’ (O’Malley, 2006: 169), However not everyone has the same array of choices and ‘free choice’ is, according to Hacking a ‘hollow mockery’ because statistics (such as those generated in the draft guidelines) create ‘classifications within which people must think of themselves and the actions that are open to them’ (1991: 194). Some of the participants, similar to Albrechtsen quoted above, saw themselves as quite able to control their own drinking and resented the government’s intrusion into their private lives:
No I don’t really care about what someone else’s studied, I’ve had enough experience to judge for myself (Male, Melbourne, Interview #22).

Yeah. I think it's up to the individual. There's no other person but myself that can figure it out, and no one else that can say you cannot take this, or if you have one more you'll be gone (Male, Geelong, Interview #5).

Beck’s (1994) concept of individualization, the requirement ‘that individual’s must produce their own biographies’ (Lupton, 1999: 69) is evident in the focus on personal experience and framing of the individual as the controller of his/her own destiny.

Others similarly resisted being told what to do but were concerned about the social aspects of drinking such as public displays of drunkenness and differences in people’s reactions to alcohol, the latter only receives scant attention in the draft guidelines.

You are, like who you are, and so some people, who they are allows them to drink so much. I know quiet people who can drink fifteen drinks and because they’re so quiet and they’re just so in control and they can handle their alcohol very well, like stoic people, they don’t have to worry about these recommended guidelines, because it won’t make a difference to their life. They know, they’ve tried, and other people can drink one drink and they’ll fall apart…So I find these guidelines very, very guideline (Male, Geelong, Interview #3).

… I’d say responsible drinking for me is knowing your limits, like as in throwing up, I know you’d probably consider that irresponsible but I think it’s something that you have to go through. I think … so that’s almost, I wouldn’t say it’s responsible but … put it this way, irresponsible drinking is getting to the point where you have to have your stomach pumped…so I consider responsible drinking is just knowing your limits and knowing your
responsibilities as well the next day, like drinking and driving, that kind of thing (Female, Melbourne, Interview #2).

These two young people emphasise responsibility, meeting your obligations, not being a burden on others and not engaging in public displays of drunkenness of the type seen in media representations of young people and alcohol. Moderation is not a factor. Deborah Lupton points to the ‘importance of order and control in the late modern sensibility’ (1999: 136) and it is this need for control and their ability to know themselves and to know their limits that is paramount for these young drinkers.

“I’m here for a good time not a long time”

As previously discussed the link between alcohol and pleasure is either absent or dismissed in the guidelines and where it is mentioned in harm minimization discourses it is linked to risk. Lupton however has identified a ‘counter discourse, in which risk-taking is represented far more positively’ (1999: 149). Her example refers to the phenomenon of extreme sports but can equally be applied to so-called risky drinking.

Q  Okay. So what if these guidelines referred to long-term health implications of alcohol, not so much, you know, what’s safe for you on the night?

A  Those ones we also tend to ignore because I’m here for a good time, not a long time.

Q  Okay.

A  Which is my mate’s theory - I stole it from him - but it’s also the point where I’m very aware of all these implications. I’m aware that I’m killing my liver. I’m aware, like I said, that I don’t smoke because I didn’t want to hurt my lungs, but I don’t use my liver for anything else. That’s what it’s there for.
I know these things and I take them into account, but if you shove information in my face, I will go, ‘Yeah, I know it. No, I don’t care (Male, Geelong, Interview #3).

Not really. I kind of think that if I'm going to have a big night I’ll have a big night, if that wrecks me it wrecks me. I kind of think I'm out there to have … I'm only going to live this life once so hopefully the damage that I'm creating now isn’t going to hit me until I'm 70 so by then I’ll have my super to pay for my hospital bills to get a new liver or something [laughter]. (Female, Geelong, Interview #11).

Pat O’Malley points out that ‘harms that exist only in the possible future must increasingly be governed as if they are actually occurring problems or ‘objective risks’ in the here and now’. There is an increasing governmental imperative for us to devote more time to securing our future health so that in a sense ‘the present is consumed and governed by the future’ (2006: 170). As can be seen from the examples above this is problematic in young people who never quite believe they will grow old and in a consumer culture in which pleasure and gratification are to be experienced ‘now’ and the idea of delayed gratification is an anathema.

**Conclusion – the ideal subject of liberal governance?**

Robin Room has urged that more attention be paid to ‘who uses a discourse, and how it is received; to the boundaries of application of a discourse, and to breaks and imperfections in its application; and to the relation between governing images and the images, attitudes and arguments at the level of everyday communication’ (2001:33). This paper is a gesture in this direction.

In many respects the short excerpts I have re-presented here demonstrate that these young people have taken on the neo-liberal call to be responsible, rational, reasonable and independent. They talk of control, behaving in public, knowing themselves and
their limits and being able to make decisions about alcohol within these limits. They do this at the same time as eschewing the ‘proper’ pleasure of liberal governance discourses that is cast in terms of the pursuit and practise of moderation. Instead, the pleasure they pursue is immediate, enjoyable and exciting. In this process they could be said to exploit the contradictions in harm minimisation discourses with their emphasis on providing information to enable ‘informed choice’.

Lupton writes of ‘hybrid’ identities in which ‘the hybrid is that which combines two types thought of as distinct from each other in such a way as to merge their characteristics into a new type’. This hybridity can be applied to the piling up of discourses evident here. Hybridity in this formulation is risky because it is unbounded and always mutating and defies ‘taken-for-granted categories’ (1999:132). By only paying lip-service to pleasure and to the social and cultural worlds of young people and the sense they make of it, instead emphasising scientific and medical expertise, the NH&MRC guidelines run the risk of being ignored or being seen as totally irrelevant to people’s lives. Stanton Peele, an American health professional, asks ‘Can the concept of pleasure be used to encourage healthy drinking?’ (1999: 2). But has he missed the point? Peele is suggesting here that drinking pleasures might somehow be able to be coopted into the service of liberal governance but as Lupton points out:

In a world in which self-containment and self-regulation are highly valued and encouraged, participation in activities that are culturally coded as ‘risky’ allows the contemporary body/self to revel, at least for a time, in the pleasures of the grotesque’ or ‘uncivilized’ body (1999: 171).
References

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