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This is the Author's version of the paper published as:

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Title: 'I'm gonna sound like a drunk here'. Constructions of volume of consumption

Year: 2007

Journal: Youth Studies Australia

Volume: 26

Issue: 2

Pages: 35-42

Date: June

ISSN: 1038-2569

DOI: http://www.acys.info/journal/issues/v26-n2-2007/summaries/article4_pena

Keywords: YOUTH -- Alcohol use

DRINKING of alcoholic beverages

DRINKING behavior

ALCOHOLISM

FOCUSED group interviewing

Abstract: Discursive psychology was used as a means of increasing our understanding of the way young people may talk about volume of consumption in relation to their drinking behaviour. Analysis of the audio recording and transcript of a pilot focus group discussion with four young people revealed that participants employed varying constructions of volume in their talk about alcohol consumption. Moreover, at different times, they also discussed drinking without any discernable references to volume. The implications of these constructions are discussed in relation to exchanges between professionals and young people, such as media campaigns and brief interventions.

“I’m gonna sound like a drunk here”

Constructions of volume of consumption

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Binge drinking is currently the norm rather than the exception among young people in Australia. The most recent ABS National Health Survey (2004-2005) (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006) shows that young people aged between 18 and 24 are the most likely age group to drink at levels considered to be risky or high risk for short-term harm, as defined by the National Health and Medical Research Council’s guidelines. In the 12 months prior to the survey, nearly one in five males (19%) and over one in 10 females (11%) in the cohort consumed alcohol at risky/high risk levels *at least once a week* (ABS 2006). The prevalence of binge drinking among this group is prompting serious concern among health professionals (Chikritzhs et al. 2003; Sheehan & Ridge 2001).

Despite nationwide efforts to reduce binge drinking among young people, the proportion of youth who continue to engage in this behaviour remains unacceptably high (Jonas, Dobson & Brown 2000). Part of the problem may be that many “at risk” drinkers simply do not consider their level of alcohol consumption to be problematic. Educators and communication experts have recently argued that health professionals and researchers may be contributing to this problem by using language and concepts that are inconsistent with the way lay people view alcohol consumption (Lederman et al. 2003).

The gap between the way that professionals discuss drinking, both in the media and in research articles, and the way drinking is constructed by young people constitutes a barrier to best practice in the youth sector. It hinders efforts towards effective communication between professional, such as researchers, general practitioners, youth workers and counsellors to name a few, and young people. In order to facilitate the design of more effective messages to reach and engage the target audience it is necessary to have an in-depth

understanding of the way young people talk about and construct drinking. Unfortunately, most conventional youth drinking research is not designed or suited to examining how young people talk about alcohol consumption.

The majority of youth drug studies, especially those conducted in Australia, have traditionally focused on epidemiology. This has been useful in delineating and highlighting the binge-drinking phenomenon among young people. Nevertheless, it is increasingly recognised that studies focusing on the quantification and measurement of behaviour alone are not sufficient to inform effective preventive and communication strategies. Policymakers and health professionals need further information, such as how young people actually talk about and understand their drinking in order to be in a better position to both understand and communicate with the youth population (Buck & Morgan 1999; Measham 2006).

A discursive approach

Research that addresses drinking from a consumers' perspective is becoming increasingly common (see for example Brain, Parker & Carnawath 2000; Lindsay 2006; Sheehan & Ridge 2001). The available literature on young people's understanding of drinking experiences, including those involving high levels of consumption, supports the claim that the way young people speak of and conceptualise drinking is very different from professional thought (Beccaria & Guidoni 2002; Goodhart et al. 2003; Lederman et al. 2003; Sheehan & Ridge 2001; Murgaff, Parrott & Bennett 1999). For example, despite the focus on volume of consumption which pervades professional discourse, some studies indicate that, unlike professionals, young people do not speak of drinking in terms of number of drinks consumed. Young people tend to talk about drinking in terms of its consequences, such as intoxication and impaired judgment (Goodhart et al. 2003; Lederman et al 2003; Sheehan & Ridge 2001; Workman 2001).

One research approach particularly suited to investigating the way that young people talk about drinking is Edward and Potter's (1992) discursive psychology. According to this perspective, people's accounts inescapably construct objects, events or behaviour (such as drinking) in certain ways to the exclusion of others (Wetherell & Potter 1992). Unlike other methodological approaches that examine drinking from a young person's perspective, discursive psychology focuses analytical attention on what accounts of drinking are used *to do*, rather than accounts of drinking *per se*. Edwards (1997) argues that all accounts are functional in that they are used to achieve different social actions, such as blaming, justifying, excusing etc.

Questions raised by this approach are: What functions do different constructions of drinking serve? How does the omission or inclusion of information about volume of consumption contribute to the work achieved by accounts of personal consumption? This approach does not attempt to predict attitudes and behaviour or reveal underlying cognitive structures and processes. Instead, it focuses our attention on the social construction of reality and behaviour, as well as the implications of different constructions.

This study adopts a discursive approach to youth drinking in order to investigate how young people talk about volume of consumption. It will look at if and how young people construct quantity in discourse and the different implications of each construction. The goal is not to describe young people's attitudes towards drinking, but to show how discursive practices are used to justify and promote (or discourage) drinking.

Method

This study is based on a pilot focus group conducted as part of a program of doctoral research. The focus group is not used as an instrument for the collection of accurate or truthful accounts of drinking and bingeing. Rather, it is used as a method of eliciting available ways of talking about volume of alcohol consumption among a group of young people, as well as to explore the different functions of different ways of talking (Potter 1996).

Recruitment of participants was based on the principles of purposive sampling. Participants were selected on the basis of their ability to provide insights relevant to the topic under study (Carson et al. 2001). Four self-identified young drinkers, two females (aged 20 and 23) and two males (aged 19 and 23), participated in the pilot focus group. They were selected from among the principal researcher's acquaintances available at the time of the scheduled discussion, although none of the participants knew each other.

An experienced moderator, who was a few years older than the participants, led the focus group discussion in a popular local bar. The venue was chosen for its accessibility and familiarity to participants. The discussion was semi-structured in that a list of topics was used as an interview guide. However, respondents were encouraged as much as possible to define their own agenda, and in doing so, many topics were covered without being directly solicited by the moderator. The moderator guide briefly outlined three topics that required coverage: typical drinking patterns, high-consumption patterns, and a narrow focus on binge drinking. The focus group lasted for approximately one and a half hours. The conversation was recorded and transcribed in detail.

Analysis

By listening a number of times to the audio recording of the data, and simultaneously reading the transcript, the researcher identified and marked all references to quantity, however vague, for further analysis. All talk that appeared to implicitly allude to volume of consumption was also identified and marked for further analysis. For example, talk about intoxication infers volume without necessarily discussing it.

Each reference was analysed in the context in which it occurred, and largely on the basis of the following questions: How does this reference to, or absence of, volume of consumption contribute to the talk? What does this achieve?

Links and networks of meaning were established, and functions of different ways of talking were identified. These will be illustrated with extracts from the transcripts, in context as far as possible.

The analysis and discussion sections have been combined because separating the two sections would be difficult and would impair readability, given the nature of the "results".

Analysis and discussion

All participants occasionally talked about drinking in terms of volume of consumption. In some instances they referred to the number of drinks consumed while in others they used less specific constructions of volume. However, at other times, participants discussed drinking without any discernible references to volume.

Instead, other aspects of an event, such as consequences, duration or context, implied a certain level of alcohol consumption. These different ways of talking about drinking and volume of consumption allowed speakers to perform similar actions in different conversational contexts. Overall, most if not all of participants' talk was oriented towards managing the self impression created through talk, and justifying as well as sometimes normalising what might otherwise have been considered risky, immature or irresponsible behaviour. The function and implications of each construction of volume is discussed below.

Volume as a discursive resource

Formal quantification rhetoric (FQR)

In contrast to research in which young people did not talk about drinking in terms of number of drinks consumed (Goodhart et al. 2003; Lederman et al. 2003; Sheehan & Ridge 2001; Workman 2001), the focus group participants sometimes did talk about number of drinks. "Formal quantification" refers to the practice of specifying quantities using numbers, including proportions and figures, to construct volume of consumption. Some examples from the focus group are "three beers", "three quarters of the bottle" and "a glass of wine".

In the following exchange, a focus group participant is responding after two other participants to the first question posed by the moderator regarding how much, how often and when participants drink.

Extract 1

Bob: *Well, I'm gonna sound like a drunk here*

Moderator: *(Laughs) No.*

Bob: *We've got a fridge in the shed, that's specifically a beer fridge, set at the right temperature, and, I'll probably have **two or three beers** every day, just come home from work and relax.*

The specification of the number of drinks consumed is offered to present personal daily alcohol consumption as unproblematic. Arguably, Bob's words are designed to pre-empt and dismiss negative interpretations of his drinking, and the mention of number of drinks contributes to this form of impression management. Bob's reply works against the possible interpretation of his behaviour as that of "a drunk" by including attention to detail (i.e. specific drink temperature) and a description of context that is arguably at odds with cultural stereotypes of drunks. The only aspect of his response that could suggest he is a drunk is his daily consumption of alcohol. However, the detail offered about the quantity and type of drink consumed as well as the context in which it is consumed work against this interpretation and draw on stereotypes of widely accepted behaviour (i.e. Australian men as beer drinkers and entitlement to drink after a hard day's work). Bob thus effectively normalises his daily consumption by placing it within an acceptable context.

The use of FQR in this extract actively contributes to this normalisation. In this context, a vague reference to volume would have left room for speculation about Bob's daily consumption as possibly elevated

and problematic. Instead, FQR effectively constructs Bob's daily consumption as verifiably low. Note that exact consumption is constructed on the basis of the number of beers consumed rather than standard drinks. This is arguably a more practical unit of measurement as the "standard drink" measures displayed on drink containers often involve odd, unintuitive figures, such as "1.3 standard drinks". Number of drinks, as opposed to number of standard drinks, is a more practical, ready-made unit of measurement often used by focus group participants to construct their level of consumption.

Informal quantification rhetoric (INFQR)

By far the most prevalent means of quantifying consumption was through informal references to volume. "Informal quantification" refers to the use of vague, comparative terms to discuss volume of consumption. For example, the participants used expressions such as "a few drinks", "shitloads of jelly shots" and "drink up big" that allowed them to mention volume of consumption without necessarily specifying exact quantities.

Extract 2

Moderator: What happens if you decide that you're going to get plastered, what happens during this session, what sort of things, go on? Is it in a particular occasion or has something triggered it off or is, or?

Luke: Well, it's more, it's more that you're, you're just out.

Mary: I don't think, yeah, you don't usually aim to get just crapfaced, you just drink and take it as it comes and eventually (laughs) you will.

Moderator: (laughs) It will happen.

Mary: Yeah, you know you are but you don't aim to become that way.

Moderator: So it's not a deliberate thing you're saying, "This is it I'm gonna get plastered..."¹

Mary: Yep.

Moderator: "cause, cause..."

Luke: Yeah

Moderator: "...tonight's Friday".

*Mary: See, I do **drink a fair bit** but I don't act stupid. I can have fun, have a laugh, have a dance, blah blah blah, but I'm not gonna be staggering around and bump into trees and vomit everywhere and stuff like that.*

This extract shows how a speaker is able to discuss alcohol consumption in terms of volume, without necessarily mentioning the exact number of drinks consumed. Vague references to volume allow the construction of varying levels of consumption in a way that is similar to more precise references to number of drinks. In using the comparative formulation "a fair bit", Mary actively draws attention to her consumption as

relatively elevated in comparison to an unspecified standard. Similarly, other participants used comparable expressions such as “a few beers” and “a few too many shots of Bacardi”.

These references raise the question: What do different levels of language of vagueness accomplish? In this case, the vague construction of volume is strategic in that it is offered in the context of dealing with the delicate subject of heavy drinking. Admissions of heavy drinking, such as getting “plastered” are inherently problematic in that they could lead to undesirable attributions of immaturity, irresponsibility or risk-taking. In this extract, talk about personal consumption is oriented towards avoiding such attributions. After a rejection of the moderator’s construction of deliberate intoxication, and in order to justify her drinking, Mary talks about her volume of consumption with a qualification regarding what she doesn’t do. The construction of drinking in informal terms allows Mary to admit to relatively heavy drinking and simultaneously justify her consumption on the basis that it does not lead to outwardly problematic behaviour. The informal reference to volume constructs elevated consumption while avoiding undue emphasis on quantity, which could constitute a problem for self-presentation as it could lead to negative attributions of heavy or irresponsible drinking. The focus is instead on another aspect of drinking – outcomes – that in turn contribute to the justification of Mary’s consumption.

Mary’s emphasis on the context in which she drinks, rather than her level of consumption, allows the construction of a social practice, further shifting the focus away from drinking as what she does, to less contentious and more positive activities. The emphasis on non-alcohol-related activities normalises the relatively high consumption by constructing it alongside non-problematic, even positive behaviour, such as having fun and dancing. Similarly, the distinction between drinking and its outcomes also contributes to the justification of heavy drinking on the basis on non-problematic outward behaviour and the absence of any negative consequences. In this manner, through the use of INFQR, which plays down the importance of volume, just about any level of drinking could be justified as long as it doesn’t lead to problematic behaviour. Unfortunately, one of the most powerful outcomes of this construction is the ignoring of the passive consequences of consumption, which the drinker can’t immediately see or control (such as, internal physiological damage).

The use of INFQR effectively obscures actual consumption and facilitates the justification of heavy drinking by reducing or minimising the actual volume of consumption. Moreover, it shifts the focus of talk away from volume as an important factor of a drinking situation, assigning it an almost insignificant place. Within this way of talking, volume is an issue only in a relative sense. The lack of knowledge of consequences and concern with quantity is worrying from a professional standpoint.

Extracts 1 and 2 reveal that different levels of detail are managed by speakers to attend to issues of impression management specific to different conversational contexts.² From a discursive perspective it is not helpful to make statements such as “young people do not tend to talk about drinking in terms of number of drinks consumed”. Instead the data suggest that different ways of talking about drinking and volume of consumption allow young people to present themselves favourably and their consumption as normal or at least unproblematic.

The construction of intoxication

The focus group data revealed that drinking and especially heavy consumption can be implied in the absence of any references that link drinking and volume consumption. In fact this type of discourse was predominantly used to frame references to heavy drinking, as in the extract below.

Extract 3

- Moderator: So are there any other occasions where you sit there and you think oh, bugger this I'm gonna get*
- Jane: **Let off steam.***
- Luke: Yeah, though well, umm.*
- Moderator: What sort of occasions?*
- Mary: Actually yeah, yeah, when I'm stressing at work if I've had a really, really bad day, like bad day.*
- On a Friday afternoon I think, yep, I'm gonna go out and **get drunk** tonight and just relax and not*
- have to think about work, cause I don't think about work, if there's music playing and you're*
- dancing and stuff. That's the only time **I let off steam** really.*

The extract above contains highlighted expressions that suggest heavy drinking without references to number of drinks. The moderator begins with a question that sounds as though it was going to be about getting “drunk”. However, she stops mid-sentence and Jane pitches in and completes the question with a metaphor that seems consistent with the moderator’s intentions, but is morally neutral. While the meaning of Jane’s metaphor is unambiguous, as evidenced by Mary’s interpretation of the jointly constructed question as being about intentional intoxication, it is used to construct heavy drinking in non-judgmental terms – as an understandable and even necessary practice.

In contrast to a professional emphasis on the number of drinks consumed, participants sometimes implied heavy drinking with references to consequences (such as intoxication), duration of an occasion, metaphors and contextual details. This finding is congruent with previous research that found that young people talk about drinking in terms of consequences (Goodhart et al. 2003; Lederman et al. 2003; Sheehan & Ridge 2001; Workman 2001). The omission of information about volume is functional in that it offers ample opportunity to construct heavy drinking in a variety of ways, including positive, necessary or humorous ways. In the absence of information about volume of consumption, other positive and arguably less contentious aspects of a drinking occasion are emphasised, facilitating the justification or normalisation of a practice that could otherwise be negatively perceived. Omitting, or including, information regarding volume is a strategy that functions to manage issues of self-presentation, depending on the local conversational context.

In Extract 2, Mary denies that she deliberately gets intoxicated, while in Extract 3, she explicitly states that she occasionally gets deliberately intoxicated. This contradiction supports the discursive approach to interaction which emphasises the variability of accounts in contrast to more traditional approaches, which accept data at face value. Contrary to professional approaches to alcohol consumption, which label intoxication as bad or risky, the talk analysed in this paper reveals that participants sometimes construct intoxication as functional.

In Extract 2, alcohol consumption is constructed in terms of both the act of drinking and the volume of consumption. Mary rejects the moderator's construction of deliberate intoxication by presenting intoxication as an outcome of drinking and not its purpose. She emphasises drinking (as opposed to getting drunk) as what the drinker does. The differentiation between one's actions (i.e. drinking) and their consequences (i.e. intoxication) facilitates the justification of the eventual consequences on the basis that they are not deliberately sought. This allows the presentation of behaviour in a non-problematic way. It effectively excuses intoxication as long as it is not intentional. The characteristic of intoxication that Mary rejects is not the high level of drinking implied, but the fact that it is presented as deliberate. The explicit distinction drawn between aim and outcome as two separate concepts allows the justification of one (i.e. intoxication) and the denial of another (i.e. intention). The perhaps pedantic nature of this distinction appears to create some tension, which is diffused through laughter.

On the other hand, in Extract 3, the act of drinking is only implied through a metaphor and references to intoxication. This way of talking implicitly constructs and justifies heavy drinking as the means to purposeful achievement of a desirable, understandable and even necessary end (i.e. drunkenness). Quantity is relevant only indirectly as it allows the achievement of the sought after state. The drinking episode is constructed in terms of what it does for the drinker (i.e. enables relaxation, forgetting about work etc.) so that, ultimately, the end justifies the (implied) means. In contrast to Extract 2, this way of talking effectively obscures volume of consumption and assigns it a rather insignificant place within the context of an occasion or drinking episode.

Although the participants' lack of concern for volume of consumption is worrying from a professional standpoint, their focus on the consequences of drinking is promising. For example, recent research shows that subjective assessments of intoxication are better predictors of harm than number of drinks consumed (Lange & Voas 2001). Interventions that focus on the consequences of drinking may be more instructive than standard drink information because the effects of intoxication are more likely to be similar across a range of people than the effects of five drinks. The different ways that participants discuss alcohol consumption suggest that there are features of drinking unrelated to volume that could be considered indicators of risky consumption (e.g. assessments of intoxication).

Conclusion

This study suggests that young people construct drinking in terms of volume of consumption, but also talk in terms of consequences and other aspects of an occasion. These different ways of talking are all geared towards presenting a positive (or at least not problematical) image of oneself and of one's alcohol consumption. The flexibility of the participants' drinking talk, as demonstrated by the sometimes contradictory nature of their talk, facilitated and contributed to the justification as well as the normalisation of a number of different drinking patterns, including those considered to be risky or high risk by health authorities.

According to Gillies and Willig (1997), discursive constructions can be seen to exert a powerful influence on the way people behave and experience the world. When one's consumption, regardless of volume, is constructed as normal and unproblematic, the concept of risk is unlikely to be applied personally. This may at least partly explain why efforts to change the way young people drink through information campaigns have had little impact. Information about risky and dangerous patterns of drinking is unlikely to engage young people who see their consumption as normal or justifiable.

The talk analysed in this paper suggests that instead of focusing so much on the number of drinks consumed, education to reduce high-risk drinking could address other aspects of a drinking episode, such as its

consequences, context or duration, from a harm minimisation perspective. An example of such an approach is the Red Cross 'Save a Mate' initiative, which encourages harm reduction, "safe partying" and the importance of looking out for one another. Because such youth-run programs originate in youth culture and discourse, they are arguably more likely to reach and engage young people. However, more research is required to determine their efficacy. Meanwhile, research on alcohol education is starting to focus on multiple aspects of drinking episodes as more findings reveal that how one drink is just as relevant as how much alcohol is consumed (International Centre for Alcohol Policies 2004).

The finding that intoxication may represent a positive and sought-after state for young people highlights the need for health promotion efforts to incorporate an understanding of the structural and contextual determinants of drinking behaviour. For example, counter-intuitive standard drink labelling is unlikely to facilitate young people's understanding of risky-drinking patterns.

The main concern of alcohol-related professionals dealing with young people, both directly, for example in brief interventions and counselling hotlines, and indirectly, through the design of self-help literature and media campaigns, should be to target and question the kind of discourses that normalise and justify harmful patterns of drinking. On the basis of this research, it is suggested that it might be constructive to question the implicit assumptions in youth discourse that justify risky consumption patterns and to point out other possibilities of talking about and understanding drinking behaviour. Professionals also have an ethical responsibility to monitor their talk and refrain from engaging in discourses (either explicitly through laughter and agreement or implicitly through silence) that justify or trivialise harmful patterns of alcohol consumption.

Standards of best practice throughout the youth sector need to be informed by an in-depth understanding of the discursive practices of young people themselves. In the area of alcohol education, an understanding of the discursive constructions used to explain and justify drinking, and especially heavy drinking, provides a useful perspective on the drinking behaviour of young people. Youth-initiated approaches or programs with high youth involvement are likely to be the most effective means of engaging a youth audience. This research suggests that the benchmark for best practice in alcohol education in the youth sector should be the challenge of discourses that normalise or justify risky patterns of drinking. Further research could investigate the discursive constructions of a larger and perhaps more diverse sample of young drinkers. In addition, research that identifies the discursive constructions used by non-drinkers, ex-drinkers or drinkers who recognise their consumption to be problematic could prove helpful in highlighting alternative ways of talking and thinking about drinking.

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NOTES

- 1 Although this sentence may not appear to make sense on paper (i.e. it has been suggested that it should read “so you’re NOT saying this is it I’m going to get plastered”), it made sense in the context of the interaction and it makes sense when one listens to the audio. The key to understanding is in the vocal delivery of the lines (which are uttered rather quickly almost as one word!) which unfortunately cannot be reproduced here with any measure of accuracy.
- 2 Note that although this expression implies that speakers consciously monitor and shape their talk, this is not what is intended. Without engaging in a debate regarding to what extent this may be the case, we would simply like to note that considerations of constructs (e.g. speaker intentions) which may be considered outside of the talk being analysed, are generally inconsistent with a discursive approach that emphasises the importance of talk and language.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank Richard Chenhall for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

