

‘You’re repulsive’: Limits to acceptable drunken comportment for young adults

Sarah MacLean ^{a,b}, Amy Pennay ^a and Robin Room ^{a,c}

^a Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 3000, Victoria,
Australia

^b Department of Community and Clinical Allied Health, La Trobe University, Bundoora, 3086,
Victoria, Australia

^c Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm,
Sweden

Email addresses

s.maclean@latrobe.edu.au

a.pennay@latrobe.edu.au

r.room@latrobe.edu.au

Corresponding author: **Sarah MacLean**

Department of Community and Clinical Allied Health
La Trobe University, Bundoora, 3086, Australia
S.MacLean@latrobe.edu.au
+61 3 94791374 / +61 418778081

Abstract

Background: Researchers have described a ‘culture of intoxication’ among young people.

Yet drunkenness remains a socially risky practice with potential to evoke emotions of irritation and even disgust. We consider intoxicated practices that young adults in Melbourne, Australia, described as distasteful, to identify contemporary cultural forces that constrain intoxication and limit how it is enacted.

Method: Interviews were conducted with 60 participants in Melbourne, Australia, each with recent drinking experience. Participants were asked to provide accounts of moments when they regarded their own or others’ drunken comportment as unsociable or unpleasant. Transcripts were analysed to identify recurrent themes.

Results: Despite amusement when recounting drunken antics, almost everyone in the study identified some discomfort at their own or other’s drunkenness. We describe four interacting domains where lines delineating acceptable comportment appear to be drawn. The first concerns intoxicated *practices*. Unpleasant drunken comportment often entailed a sense that the drunk person had disturbed others through an overflow of the self – extruding intimacy, sexuality, violence or bodily fluids. The second domain was *gendering*, with women vulnerable to being regarded as sexually inappropriate, and men as threatening. Third, the *settings* where intoxicated behaviour occurred influenced whether intoxicated people risked censure. Finally, the *relationships* between the drunk person and

others, including their respective social positions and drinking patterns, shaped how they were perceived.

Conclusion: The capacity of alcohol to render people more open to the world is both sought and reviled. It is important to recognise that there remain limits on acceptable drunken comportment, although these are complex and contingent. These limits are enforced via people's affective responses to drunkenness. This is form of alcohol harm reduction that occurs outside of public health intervention. Thus, cultures that constrain drinking should be supported wherever it is possible to do so without reinforcing stigmatising identities.

Introduction

The past decade has seen a burgeoning literature on the imperatives many young people feel to seek alterity through alcohol and other substance use (Griffin *et al.*, 2009; Pennay, 2012; Pennay and Moore, 2010). Researchers have described a culture of intoxication among young people that is constituted through the night time economy and alcohol promotions, arguing that heavy alcohol and drug use has become normalised (Measham and Brain, 2005). This literature describes hedonistic and carnivalesque pleasures of heavy drinking.

Yet drinking to intoxication remains a socially risky practice with potential to evoke emotions of irritation and even disgust in both drinkers themselves and those around them. Behaving too unpleasantly and doing this too many times taints a person's self-image and social reputation. Social censure against alcohol use is evident where people drink in settings (such as at work or when caring for young children) where cultural norms dictate that they should be sober (Simonen *et al.*, 2014; Törrönen and Roumeliotis, 2014). Women are in a particularly invidious situation when it comes to appropriate drunken comportment. While young women in societies such as present-day Australia are expected to display gregarious sociability when drinking, they are judged harshly if they lose control to the point where they appear overly sexually available (De Crespigny and Vincent, 1999; Griffin *et al.*, 2013). The damage of uncontrolled alcohol use to an individual's social standing is particularly evident in the stigma associated with being labelled as an alcoholic (Schomerus *et al.*, 2011).

Some studies have explored how people limit or 'stage' alcohol use to achieve a moderate rather than an acute level of intoxication (Lindsay, 2009; Lyons *et al.*, 2014; Zajdow and

MacLean, 2014). Yet despite the attention given to young people's drinking, and public concern about cultures or circumstances that encourage people to drink to excess, relatively little academic attention has been given to identifying culturally embedded ideas and practices that encourage people to limit or avoid intoxication, or to behave more sociably when they drink. This information is important for two reasons. First, attempting to identify cultural limits to intoxicated bad behaviour contributes to our understanding of how and why young people organise and limit their drinking. Second, because these limits may function to reduce harm from alcohol use. Duff (2004, 391) has suggested that the social norms that exist within networks (particularly the stigma around 'messy' substance use) have set the grounds for 'active limit-setting' and the promotion of more moderate forms of consumption. Existing cultural frames that limit intoxication and moderate drunken comportment must be understood if they are to be reinforced, or at least not disrupted, through public health campaigns.

In 1969, MacAndrew and Edgerton argued that intoxicated behaviours are not simply a function of the pharmacological effects of alcohol, but that social norms also shape how people act when they drink. In other words, alcohol does not simply act on bodies; people also enact drunkenness through sets of practices that are recognisable as manifestations of being drunk within the specific social contexts of their lives. But while MacAndrew and Edgerton regarded alcohol use as excusing behaviours which would be interpreted as unsociable in a sober person, they recognised that drunkenness was not a license for any behaviour at all. In any given circumstance, there will be a range of drunken practices which fall outside what they termed the 'within-limits clause' (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969).

Although MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) identified the existence of upper boundaries of toleration of drunken comportment, their focus was on cultural variation in what was tolerated, with little attention to describing how the outside limit was defined and how behaviour that transgressed this limit was censured. In this paper we explore how drinkers aged 18-24 in Melbourne, Australia, negotiate the far verge of the 'within limits' clause for acceptable drunken comportment, identifying four domains where lines delineating acceptable comportment appear be drawn. We conclude by indicating how limits to drunken comportment may be theorised nearly half a century after McAndrew and Edgerton: as guided by primarily by affective responses rather than rules. We also indicate the possible implications of reinforcing stigmatising drinking practices for health campaigns.

Method

The analysis here draws on qualitative interviews conducted in 2012 with 60 people living in Melbourne aged 18-24 who had consumed at least one alcoholic drink within the previous six months. The study was designed to provide insights into subcultures and practices that frame young adults' alcohol consumption. Ethical approval was obtained from two universities (see Acknowledgements).

Equal numbers of women and men were recruited via advertisements placed at local tertiary education institutions, at agencies providing services for young people, and through word of mouth. Two-thirds of the participants were employed full or part time and six were neither studying nor working. Reflecting contemporary Australian multiculturalism, 17 were born outside Australia and 19 spoke a language in addition to English. Participants were

offered the choice of completing interviews on their own (n=35), or with one (n=16) or two (n=9) friends.

Three experienced researchers conducted interviews using a detailed theme sheet. A brief survey was administered to each participant to establish demographic characteristics and alcohol consumption patterns. Although the sample was accessed through convenience methods, their demographic characteristics and, importantly, their drinking patterns, broadly resembled participants of the same age in a representative survey sample (MacLean and Callinan, 2013).

During interviews we asked how participants felt when they saw someone who was really drunk and whether there had ever been a time when they had regretted something they had done while intoxicated. To ensure all relevant comments were included in the analysis, we reviewed the transcripts for descriptions of drunkenness that were regarded as negative in any way. Transcripts were analysed thematically and coded in two phases, reflecting descriptive and analytic representation of data (Wolcott, 1994). As part of this we paid close attention to participants' choice of words, seeking to understand the implications of metaphors used to describe drunken practices. All the names used here are pseudonyms.

We include participants' reflections both on their own drunken comportment and on that of others in our analysis, because, as we shall show, we regard the two as mutually constitutive. Participants often forgave others' intoxicated infractions on the basis that they had done similar things themselves. At the same time they regulated their own behaviour at least in part through their responses to enactments of intoxication by friends and strangers.

In organising the data, we were informed by the work of Mol (2012), who argues that the body is not a coherent and consistent entity, retaining its integrity as it moves through the world. Rather, the body emerges in different guises according to the 'settings, practices, situations' where it is located. With this in mind, we identified four interrelated domains where drunken bodies became distasteful (to young adults themselves, as well as to others around them), generating feelings of dislike, disgust and shame. We term these the *practices, gendering, settings and relationships* of drunken comportment.

Practices of drunken comportment

In our participants' accounts, drunken comportment was adjudicated largely according to the nature of the practices enacted. When reflecting both on their own behaviour and that of others, participants spoke of excessive intimacy, displays of sexuality, of violence and of vomiting, as disturbing, particularly when a person did these things frequently.

Interviewees in the study drew a sharp distinction between drinking that led to life-threatening crises, such as a car accident, and the more everyday problems or irritations that occur around people who are drunk. They were also careful to differentiate normal drinking from that which signified an addiction, as has been described elsewhere (see Fraser *et al.*, 2014). For example, three participants spoke of family members with serious and chronic problems related to alcohol. These young adults were anxious not to adopt drinking patterns that they regarded as signalling alcoholism.

MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) described how drinking alcohol provides a justification for particular kinds of intoxicated behaviour. Many interviewees said that in most situations

they did not feel perturbed by the behaviour of people who were drunk. Arif reiterated that he had no right to judge drunken people as he'd been drunk himself, showing how intoxication provides permission to bend the rules:

I don't think the people I've seen like take it to heart, for what [people] have done under, under influence. So yeah, they forgive each other pretty fast.

Like many others, Naresh thought that being around drunk people could be fun. Drinking did not usually lead to any serious consequences for him and his friends, and hence he was generally unperturbed by intoxicated behaviour. He did, however, imply that becoming intoxicated too many times would indicate a problem and that certain forms of 'misbehaving' would not be welcomed:

Some people actually get good when they're drunk and it's funny and I feel it. ... I mean if you do it once in three months, four months then I won't say that's wrong. Sometimes the situation is that you drink too much, you lose control. But if you're not doing something, something violent or something you know ... if you're not misbehaving, then that's fine.

Nonetheless, almost everyone in the study was able to describe some kinds of drunken comportment that they regarded as unpleasant or even disgusting. As Polly intimated: 'I guess if you see some people that are really drunk and making fools of themselves, you judge them.'

In discussing times that they believed they themselves had overstepped the boundary of acceptable drunkenness, participants often spoke of shame at behaving too familiarly with others, involving excessive disclosure or intimacy. This seemed to be an area where they judged themselves more harshly than they would others. Infractions of this nature included talking too much, or moderating presentations of self inadequately by being too sad or too boisterous; letting emotions or information about themselves that would otherwise be contained spill out. This excessive intimacy also entailed stumbling into others' personal space. Anita described how her friend, when very drunk, had intruded on others in a way she found embarrassing: 'falling into things, talking to people that don't wanna talk to them'.

As we shall explore in more detail in the next section, both men and women expressed particular disgust at witnessing women who were so intoxicated as to be out of control, thus appearing too sexually available or vulnerable to harm. Bella articulated this forcefully when she reflected that witnessing a very drunk woman in a nightclub made her anxious not to be like that herself: 'It's disgusting, it's a horrible sight. You don't let yourself get to that point'.

Drunken violence was considered distasteful and frightening by most participants. A few recounted witnessing the physical or sexual assault of a friend or becoming embroiled in a fight. This was generally remembered as highly distressing. Lucy was terrified when her sister's boyfriend was knocked unconscious by a drunk man on a bus. The man and his friends proceeded to threaten her: 'I feared for my life 'cause they all came up in our faces'. James had been beaten by a drunken stranger; 'he just kicked the absolute crap out of me'. In contrast, one participant, Hayden, acknowledged that he would sometimes try to provoke

other men to fight him, regarding this as part of the excitement of going to the city on a weekend night.

Exposure to other people's bodily fluids, particularly vomit, incited disgust in many interviewees. Participants tended to reflect on witnessing other people vomit, rather than speaking about times when they themselves had done so, perhaps due to the embarrassment entailed in acknowledging it. Vomiting was so humiliating to be around that people even felt that it reflected badly on themselves when someone they knew vomited in public:

[My boyfriend] just couldn't stand up so actually [we were] carrying him through this club to get him out. So you turn around and see he's about to start [to] vomit. Yeah, it just wasn't nice to be around. It was just really embarrassing. (Edith)

Drunks, then, often became annoying to other people when they appeared to lose control of their bodies, encroaching on others' personal space. Similar findings have been established in other work, where participants described the point where acceptable drinking turned to drunkenness being marked by impairment of either cognition, speech or motor control (Midanik, 2003). Dragan referred to drunk girls using the derogatory metaphor of 'sloppy', as though they had become uncontained, spilling over onto others. Polly spoke of hating having drunk men 'breathe in your face', forcing her to absorb their odours. Although intoxication facilitates an opening up of the self to the world and provides a rationale for otherwise transgressive behaviour (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2013), this sense of overflow of the person was evident in discussions of points where alcohol-related intoxication became off-putting to the research participants.

Gendering of drunken comportment

The second domain where drunk people risked censure concerns *gendering*: the degree to which a drunken person's behaviour evoked stigmatising gendered identities.

Participants were deeply ambivalent about meanings ascribed to drunken comportment and bodies. At the same time that they expressed chagrin about drinking too much and behaving in ways they wouldn't when sober, they also laughed at these stories, taking pleasure in the images of abandoned control they were able to present through telling them (see also Griffin *et al.*, 2009). This is apparent in an excerpt from an interview with three young women, Angie, Jade and Natalie, who enjoyed talking about how being drunk let them 'hook up' with men whom they wouldn't otherwise fancy, becoming what Griffin *et al.* (2013) have referred to as 'agentically sexy':

ANGIE: It also just comes out [when you are drunk], saying things and like, you know what I mean? Even just like hooking up with [initiating sexual encounters with] people.

JADE: Yeah I was gonna say like –

ANGIE: You kind of regret that you're like 'Oh' –

JADE: I would not, I would not kiss them if I was sober!

NATALIE: Yeah, like sometimes you think that someone's cuter than what.... They're not cute at all but you think like, you're drunk and you're just looking at him 'oh he's cute' but –

JADE: Or you're horny!

NATALIE: Yeah, like, like that.

INTERVIEWER: Could be alcohol?

JADE: Yeah

NATALIE: But like they're not even good looking. Like it happens to me so many times! Like my friends always yell at me: 'What are you doing?'

INTERVIEWER: Do they?

NATALIE: Yep because I, I went up to this guy one time and I'm like:

'You're so cute'. And he was really ugly.... So, and yeah, and just yeah.

It's funny!

Drunken displays of sexuality was noted above as one of the forms of 'overflow' that participants regretted in themselves and others. In contrast to these young women's capacity to recount their drunken sexuality as playful, many study participants spoke harshly about intoxicated women, and women were particularly critical of other women in this state. As Edith reflected: 'when a woman gets drunk it seems to be a lot more bad'.

Drunk women were often perceived as highly sexual. Emma, for example, argued that intoxicated women who displayed their sexuality or appeared likely to attract sexual harm through their overt drunkenness were 'skanky' (a term denoting sexual inappropriateness) and 'gross':

Well yeah, girls just look like trash when they're really drunk and also they, they look so vulnerable too. ... When I've been out and I've seen a girl [drunk], like they're really skanky. I think that's gross, when a girl's really all over a guy, you know.

Edith used a similar metaphor of 'falling on guys' to explain behaviour that had attracted negative attention for a woman she had recently seen at a nightclub: 'She was falling everywhere, just stumbling and taking her shoes off. Just kind of looked, looked a wreck. Her hair and -- yeah just, you know, falling on guys.... Everyone looked [at her]'. Men also derided drunk women. Cooper said he 'can't stand it' when women get 'putrid'. Riley claimed that he would not be sexually attracted to a very drunk woman.

In recounting their feelings on witnessing women who were very drunk, female participants often commented that they did not want to appear that way themselves, showing something of how they reflexively moderate their own drinking. Observing a friend who could no longer control her movements or speech prompted Katie to worry that she might look similar when drunk:

A few months ago at a house party one of my friends was really, really drunk, a girl. And yeah, she was just sort of like stumbling around, she wasn't able to walk very easily and like slurring her words a lot. And I just like felt quite sorry for her and decided to like stop drinking 'cause I didn't wanna get in that state, 'cause I didn't like the look of it.

While drinking was valued as a way to facilitate sexual contact with new or existing partners, some drunken sexual liaisons were a cause for regret. This was mentioned more often, but not exclusively, by women. Clara described how a recent experience of casual sex made her worry that she was irresponsible when she was drunk. This is clearly at odds with the humorous recollection of embarrassing sexual encounters recounted by Angie, Jade and Natalie above. It shows the complex boundaries that women must negotiate between

acceptable and unacceptable enactments of their sexuality (Abrahamson, 2004; Griffin *et al.*, 2013; Sheard, 2011).

Edith, quoted above deriding a drunk woman, noted that drunk men could be disturbing in a different way:

I guess when its guys it's off-putting when ... yeah, the egos come out after a few beers and then they obviously get a bit more aggressive and horrible to be around.

Women feared and disliked unwanted attention from drunk men who threatened them sexually or invaded their body space. Honey was frightened when she was approached by 'obnoxious' drunk men late at night:

... they come up and they're like and you know they can be 'I wanna talk to you' or they make stuff like comments about you or your clothes or whatever. It's just not, not a relaxed place to be, it's scary. I can find it a bit high-tension and especially, yeah, after midnight, that's when you start to get the fights. (Honey)

Being near a drunk man could be unsettling, due in part to a sense that his behaviour was unpredictable. Both men and women disliked the experience of being jostled by drunk people or having their glass knocked. Dragan had to intervene to stop a drunken man who 'was sort of sloppy' from touching his girlfriend. When asked about what he meant by 'sloppy', Dragan explained that the man was slurring his words and stumbling around, not that his sexuality was in any way disturbing to others.

Images of men as threatening recall, for some, notions of 'lager louts', groups of young men often typified as working class, roaming streets looking for excitement (Miller *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, when women in the study maligned their boyfriends' drunken behaviour, they tended to liken them to hoodlums in the city who people try to avoid:

My boyfriend had been out in the city with his friends and he came to my house. And he had, he called me and he was like 'Can I come to your house? I'm so pissed'. And I was like 'yeah sure'. And he got a taxi to my house and I was like: 'Oh you idiot'. That's pretty much how I thought and I was like: 'You're one of those dickheads I'd see in the city and like avoid', that's what I thought. (Honey)

Drinking and recounting stories of their drunken antics enabled young women to demonstrate lively and socially engaged feminine selves. Nonetheless, they expressed condemnation of drunken women and policed their own behaviours accordingly. While most participants regarded men's physically or sexually threatening behaviour as unpleasant or frightening, men's drunkenness did not seem to produce the visceral repulsion that some described as their reactions to witnessing women's intoxication.

Settings of drunken comportment

The third domain that appeared to influence the emergence of the drunken body as disturbing rather than playful for our research participants was the settings in which it occurred.

Drunkenness was regarded far more negatively by our participants when it occurred in places where people were particularly vulnerable to harm (such as on the streets or around strangers). As we described above, women who were so drunk as to demonstrate reduced awareness of how they looked to others were widely disparaged, particularly when this occurred in public places. This is also apparent in the quotes above where women express disgust at their boyfriends for being drunk in the city. In contrast, many participants regarded being very intoxicated in relatively safe settings such as friends' homes as acceptable (see also Hallett *et al.*, 2014).

Some participants, however, placed limits on the degree of disinhibition that was acceptable for young people, even within private residences. To avoid upsetting people with his inappropriate behaviour, Steven tended to leave a party when he recognised that he was very intoxicated: 'I don't think it's nice to see yourself to be drunk and be that drunk in public; I don't think ... I don't think it's socially acceptable really'.

Vomiting discreetly in a toilet was not considered particularly humiliating, and indeed was regarded as routine for some participants who often drank heavily. Nonetheless, vomiting in public was seen by most as repulsive, due to the enforced exposure of others to smell and mess. Michelle described acute embarrassment experienced by a group of people whose friend vomited in a nightclub. She described the vomit as overflowing 'everywhere' as though it was impossible for those present not to become contaminated by it:

I actually saw one guy at [a nightclub] who was not in control of himself,
he was vomiting everywhere and his friends were embarrassed of him
and yelling at him and telling him to get up, 'cause he was on the floor.

Even without vomiting, a person drunk and alone in public, particularly if older or poor, could attract revulsion. Mitchell explained that seeing an apparently homeless person intoxicated on the street made him feel sickened and discomforted by the possibility that he too was a ‘bum’ when he drank. This was evident in the uneasy laughter with which he concluded an account of seeing the man:

I feel sick like you know, like when you see like a bum on the street that’s like you know, off their face on something [intoxicating]. I just look at them and think ‘You’re repulsive’. Why, why would anybody want to do what you are doing right now? [laughter]

Social contexts and settings prescribe when one can and cannot get drunk and the point at which the body appears excessively poorly disciplined and controlled, conjuring images of destitution and what others have referred to as the ‘disordered body’ (Keane, 2002).

Relationships of drunken comportment

Our final proposal is that the point where drunken comportment attracts censure is influenced by the *relationships* between the drunk person and others. People appear to forgive their friends’ drunken comportment more readily than that of strangers. Moreover, characteristics that frame the relationship between the drunk person and others witnessing drunkenness (such as their own drinking patterns, age and gender) also influenced how drunken comportment was perceived.

As observed in other research, participants were far more likely to forgive their friends for drunken infractions than strangers (MacLean, 2016). This may be because drunken strangers

are more unpredictable and therefore more frightening than drunken friends. In the following quote, Elke describes her obligation to manage a friend who repeatedly became obnoxious when intoxicated, even though she disliked doing this:

Yeah he just, he has like a little trigger that switches and he, yeah becomes rude to his best friends and he's just pushing people round and he can't really, he can't remember anything the next day.... He regrets it the next day, because he knows that something went wrong. It's not nice for us to sort of have to handle him, but if it's your friend you do take care of him.

While drinking is an important way of producing and maintaining friendships (MacLean, 2016; Niland *et al.*, 2013), becoming too drunk or doing so too many times can also undermine social ties. People spoke of irritation when drunken friends required care that overreached what could be expected as part of friendship. Ling pitied a friend whom she had to clean up and take home from a party:

My friends get really annoyed at her because, you know, I had to like deal with her and tidy her up [clean vomit off her] and like, you know, take her home. So that's kind of – I don't know, I think it's kind of sad.

Others told similar stories of frustration at friends who required assistance to get home, bringing their night to a premature close. Reflecting on his own behaviour, Arif wanted to avoid a situation where he needed to over-rely on friends to help him walk safely:

... you know how when you get drunk ... you can't really walk straight,
you need people to guide you? I don't, I don't like that. I don't like
people doing things for me like that.

Demonstrating excessive intimacy while drunk unsettled friendships, as discussed above. Many participants identified being able to say things that they otherwise wouldn't as a benefit of being a little drunk, as well as sometimes leading to problems. Katie observed that drinking helped her to make amusing or risqué jokes, but that it could also result in her offending someone. Steven was wary of disclosing information when he was intoxicated that he would later regret. Paul rued touching a female friend too intimately when he was drunk. Although he hadn't intended this to be threatening or inappropriate, he worried that it might have felt that way to her. Parvani reflected that she used to be a 'sad drunk' and that she had been either poor company or had distressed others by discussing unpleasant things about her life when she was in this state.

{Herold, 2019 #2346} Judgements about drinkers also seemed to be influenced by participants' own drinking practices. Some of the particularly heavy drinkers, including Hayden, were largely unconcerned about their own or other people's drunken comportment, whereas many of the lighter drinkers (see Katie or Steven above) seemed preoccupied with their own fairly minor social infractions (see also Abel and Plumridge, 2004).

Intoxication was considered socially rewarding when its effects resulted in positive changes to personality or practices, such as making people happy or funny; however, the boundaries of acceptable intoxication were breached when proper social relations, either between

friends or strangers, were threatened. This was affected by the characteristics and drinking patterns of those involved.

Discussion: domains of drunken comportment

When MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) described the behaviours that are 'within-limits' as acceptable performances of drunkenness, they depicted rules about drinking behaviour as varying between cultures, but relatively fixed within them. In contrast, contemporary theorisation of deviance and stigma finds the boundaries on what kinds of behaviour attract social censure to be porous, unclear and dynamic (Dotter, 2015). In the context of a culture of intoxication where extravagant, even carnivalesque, drunkenness is valorised as part of youthful selfhood (Measham and Brain, 2005), the point where social practices become distasteful or disgusting has no clear or absolute boundary. Our participants displayed deep ambivalence (Lemert, 1962) about drinking and the associated loss of control. Aware of the cloudy line between acceptable and unacceptable drunken comportment, they were often reluctant to judge others for behaviour they might have evinced themselves. As reported here and also in other research (Abel and Plumridge, 2004; Zajdow and MacLean, 2014), disinhibition resulting in mildly embarrassing or regrettable practices was largely disregarded or forgiven, with intoxication providing sufficient 'excuse value' for such practices (Room, 2001).

It should be recognised, however, that there remain limits on acceptable drunken comportment, although that these are complex and contingent. Almost all of our research participants felt that some kinds of intoxicated practices were distasteful. Censure against drunken comportment frequently occurred where a drunk person's body was apprehended

as 'overflowing' onto others around them, extruding uncontrolled and unmanaged intimacy, sexuality, violence or fluids. Participants were quick to activate gendered stereotypes to condemn drinking, with women's drunkenness attracting greater revulsion and men's more likely to generate fear. Getting very drunk in public was rarely admired. Both social and structural relationships between people, including gender and drinking patterns, impacted on whether and where drunk bodies emerged as distasteful. Combining these domains only served to intensify censure; for example an unknown woman who appeared excessively sexual in a public was 'disgusting' to Emma.

For Sulkunen (2002, p. 266) intoxication 'is a sticky surface onto which complicated meanings can be projected and where they can be understood even beyond words or other discourses'. Intoxication is always to some degree transgressive; always gesturing to something which is outside the boundary of the everyday, contained and sober self. This gives it a unique representative power (Paton-Simpson, 1996). Yet the images of ourselves that we confer though intoxicated behaviours are never entirely within our control. Anyone who gets drunk in the company of others must negotiate the treacherous symbolic terrain between drunken behaviour that indicates time out from the routines of life, or even exuberance, and that which marks the drinker in unwanted ways.

In Erving Goffman's (1968) seminal work, a 'spoiled identity' is acquired by those who present an attribute that is seen to disqualify them from social acceptance. More recently, Phelan et al. (2014) identify how stigmatisation of particular groups, such as the homeless, destitute and mentally ill, serves to reinforce differences and maintain social hierarchies. Many of the types of drunken infraction described in this paper appear to recall a broader stigmatising identity, linked to structural inequality. Drunken women could be perceived as

sexually inappropriate, as 'skanky' or 'gross', because of deeply embedded stigmatisation of women who appear excessively sexual within western cultures. Men whose bodies threaten others with violence or who appear unruly recall images of louts or drunken mobs. Drinkers strive to avoid any implication that they resemble vagrants or alcoholics, belying a deeply pathologised lack of self-control (Sedgwick, 1992). Vomiting in public is a powerful signifier of this kind of disordered body.

Central to MacAndrew and Edgerton's (1969) argument about drunken comportment is that intoxicated behaviours are culturally driven and not simply biologically driven. People (consciously or otherwise) enact intoxication in culturally prescribed ways, generally trying to avoid attracting social censure. Hence people's emotional responses to particular drinking practices (e.g., violence, vomiting) function not just as rules, but rather as social frameworks that influence how people behave when affected by alcohol.

Where MacAndrew and Edgerton described how people follow social rules about drunken comportment, our study shows that much of the process of self-regulation around alcohol use occurs through the generation of affective states. Young people repeatedly described affective responses embarrassment, shame, concern, dislike, fear, disgust and revulsion to their own and other's drunkenness, often when stigmatised identities were invoked. These reactions led our research participants -- often but not exclusively the women among them -- to consciously reflect on their own drunken comportment and how they would manage themselves at future drinking events. Monitoring one's own affective reactions to drunk people, alongside observing the reactions of others to their own drinking, appears to be central to how participants negotiate the boundaries of acceptable drinking practice.

As part of public health efforts to reduce harmful drinking, advertisements show people in unappealing drunken states in the hope of shoring up existing cultural sanctions against unsociable behaviours. Campaigns of this nature might gain traction with young adults through depicting drunken people as ‘overflowing’ selves, as excessively intimate, as intruding on the space of others, failing to control their sexuality, and invading people’s body space with threats of violence and nauseating smells, or through depicting these practices in the gendered ways, in settings and within relationships where disgust at drunken comportment is most likely to emerge. Yet social advertising which aims to reduce harmful drinking through showing such images also invariably reinforces stigmatising identities (the drunk woman with disarrayed clothing; the young louts; the solitary down-and-out drinker) that can exacerbate social exclusion for those so designated. The challenge for public health is thus how this can be accomplished without increasing social divisions through reinforcing stigmatising identities. Representations of damage to relationships, that is, not prematurely ending a friend’s night out or acting in a way that makes others feel uncomfortable, may be a useful avenue for targeted health promotion endeavours, as it is less likely to reinforce gendered or exclusionary stigmatisation.

Beyond public health-driven interventions, our findings support the argument of Duff (2004, 2010) and Moore (1993) that implicit social rules and informal sanctions function effectively as health-promoting resources to reduce substance-related harms. Peer-based messages and group-specific rituals and sanctions operate to instil a culture of harm reduction among social networks, where intoxicated practices may be endorsed and valorised, but always within limits (see also Lindsay, 2009; Zajdow and MacLean, 2014). Our study indicates that where that limit lies is socially and contextually contingent along boundaries relating to

practices, gender, settings and relationships. These findings endorse the utility of peer-based harm reduction strategies, particularly in the settings and contexts in which alcohol use takes place (Duff, 2004).

Young people in many countries appear to be consuming less alcohol than the same age cohorts did in past decades (Pennay *et al.*, 2015). The generation of negative affective responses within particular domains of drunken comportment that we have described here may well have contributed to this decline. Our study was conducted in Melbourne, Australia. We know little of how the limits to acceptable drunken comportment outlined here have changed over time, or how they operate in other countries. Alongside documenting the cultural forces that promote a contemporary culture of intoxication among young adults (Measham and Brain, 2005), it is important also to attend to those which serve to constrain drinking and intoxicated comportment.

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