

Alcohol and the constitution of friendship for young adults

Sarah MacLean

Centre for Health Equity, University of Melbourne and Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point.

Abstract

Friendship, sociologists suggest, is defined by institutionalised rules to a lesser degree than other important relationships. Hence it must be sustained through specific friendship-making practices. Epidemiological studies provide meagre explanations for drinking pattern similarity between friends. Social science literature tends to conceptualise friendship as enhancing the pleasures of alcohol use. This paper examines alcohol as a technology in contemporary young adults' friendship-making. Interviews with 60 drinkers aged 18-24 in Melbourne, Australia demonstrate that drinking builds intimacy, particularly when similar levels of intoxication are achieved. Fear in night time entertainment precincts underlines trust in friends. To manage uncertainty about responsibilities involved in friendship, young adults negotiate how they will care for each other when they are drunk. Providing this care occasionally jeopardises friendship, in different ways for women and men. Understanding the import of friendship-making in alcohol use helps explain the persistence of heavy drinking and suggest opportunities for harm reduction.

Key words

Alcohol, gender, intoxication, sociology of friendship, violence, young adults

Introduction

Epidemiological studies examining drinking patterns among peer and friendship groups have consistently shown that young people's alcohol consumption levels resemble those of others around them. Underlying many of these studies is a notion that alcohol use practices are transmitted, either intentionally or unintentionally, between friends. Transmission of drinking patterns been described as occurring as a result of 'influence' that people have over friends (Fujimoto and Valente, 2012a; Overbeek et al., 2011) or occasionally through the infectious disease metaphor of 'contagion' (Fujimoto and Valente, 2012b; Yarnell et al., 2013).

Informed by sociological writing on friendship, this paper offers a different explanation of alcohol use within young adults' friendship groups. Using interviews conducted with 60 drinkers aged 18-24 in Melbourne, Australia I argue that alcohol use in the bars and clubs of the night time economy (NTE) functions as a crucible where young adults may enact and affirm their friendships. While drinking alcohol at night provides young adults with an effective means of constituting friendship it also presents risks to individuals and to friendships that must be carefully managed. In concluding the paper I suggest that these two contrasting explanations of drinking within friendship groups indicate quite different sets of interventions to address alcohol related harms.

Much has been written by sociologists about new forms of relationship that have emerged in response to the conditions of late modernity. Perhaps the best known of this literature theorises contemporary spousal or marriage relationships as 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1996) or 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003). Ray Pahl (2000) and other sociologists of friendship (Allan and Adams, 2007; Badhwar, 2008; Rawlins, 1992; Smart et al., 2012) argue that friendship relationships are also patterned by social and historical contexts. Contemporary friendship, they argue, is a chosen relationship, albeit usually forged with people of our own gender and social status. Friendship offers a haven against an increasingly globalised and impersonal social world, lending us a sense of ontological security or stability in how we understand ourselves. Friendships are characterised by intimacy and trust and have become the 'central coordinates' (Pahl, 2000: 172) of our lives.

Friendship differs from other important relationships. Our connections with family members are substantiated through blood ties, birth certificates and codified familial roles. Couple relationships are deeply socially respected and (at least for heterosexuals) can be certified by marriage. In contrast, no publically recognised agreements are available to validate the existence of a friendship or specify how long it should endure for (O'Connor, 1998). Friendship is therefore uniquely contingent on the ongoing production or enaction (see Ezzy, 1998) of the relationship. As Pahl contends (2000: 63) 'there are no rules or contracts to bind us to our closest friends, we simply have to trust them'.

So to sustain a friendship we must continually constitute it by engaging in friendship-making practices that build the trust and intimacy upon which the relationship is founded. Because it is a relatively uniformalised relationship, the parameters of the relationship and extent of our responsibility to intervene to protect friends from their own mistakes are unclear. To a greater extent than other relationships, friendship enaction entails careful balancing of respect for individual autonomy against the care that is due to friends as a result of mutual intimacy (Rawlins, 1992).

This paper outlines four friendship-making practices identified in sociological writing on friendship described above that are also evident in our research participants' stories of drinking during a night out. These are: producing and affirming intimacy, demonstrating trust, negotiating the parameters of the relationship and managing tension between autonomy and responsibility when providing care. While these practices appeared to structure alcohol use in the NTE for everyone in the study, they were activated in somewhat different ways by men and women.

It is important to acknowledge that it is by no means novel to suggest that alcohol use is a social activity or that it frequently involves friends. Sociologists and anthropologists have demonstrated, for example, how attitudes and practices concerning substance use are shared and reproduced among friends (Mayock, 2002; Pilkington, 2007; Rúdólfssdóttir and Morgan, 2009). Alcohol and drug use offer groups of young adult friends opportunities to produce and manage contradictions in classed, raced, gendered and regional subjectivities (Griffin et al.,

2013; Simonen et al., 2014; Strunin, 1999; Townshend, 2013). It is widely agreed that alcohol use facilitates the initiation of sexual relationships (Abrahamson, 2004; Ferris, 1997; MacLean and Moore, 2014). Many studies identify how being with friends enhances the experience of using alcohol and produces a sense of connection with others (Brain et al., 2000; De Crespigny and Vincent, 1999; Szmigin et al., 2008; Törrönen and Maunu, 2007). Recounting drinking stories, particularly via social media, evidently strengthens ties between friends (Brown and Gregg, 2012; Griffin et al., 2009; Tutenges and Sandberg, 2013). Ethnographic work shows that the experience of intoxication itself is produced through engagements with people and places (Demant and Landolt, 2014; Tutenges, 2013). Focusing more closely on friendship, Törrönen and Maunu, (2011) explore how social emotions experienced in relation to drinking reinforce or undermine friendship and Niland et al. (2013) identify friendship practices associated with using alcohol. Nonetheless, social science literature tends to conceptualise sociality as contributing to the pleasures of alcohol use, rather than considering the contemporary nature of friendship as a force that motivates drinking, or alcohol use as a key technology in constituting friendship.

Method

The study on which this paper draws was designed to explore the place of alcohol within the lives of young adults living in Melbourne, the second largest city in Australia. Interviews were conducted in 2012 with 60 young adults aged 18-24 years, each of whom had consumed at least one alcoholic drink during the previous six months and had attended a licensed venue at night at least once. Participants were recruited via local tertiary education institutions, social welfare agencies and through word of mouth. Equal numbers of women and men were involved. The majority of participants (44) were studying on either a full- or part-time basis, with a similar proportion employed full- or part-time. Six were neither studying nor working. The sample was ethnically diverse with 19 speaking another language at home in addition to English. We did not ask about their sexuality but five participants indicated during interviews that they identified as gay or bisexual. To access detailed individual accounts as well as stories co-produced with friends, we offered participants a choice of interview on their own or with friends. Thirty-five people completed interviews on their own, 16 with one friend and nine with

two friends. Most interviews were around an hour in length. They were conducted by three experienced interviewers in participants' homes, in coffee shops and at educational institutions. Ethical approval was obtained from Human Research Ethics Committees at the two universities involved in the study. False names are used when referring to participants. Each participant's age is identified in brackets the first time she or he is mentioned.

During the interviews, participants were invited to share stories about going out to entertainment precincts in the NTE for a 'big night out'. Interviewers asked questions to probe who they went out with, whether they discussed agreements about what they would do during the night and how they might respond if a friend became very intoxicated or otherwise looked likely to get into trouble. Research interviews were recorded and transcribed and then coded using the qualitative software package NVivo. Node attributes were established in the dataset to enable easy comparison of men's and women's accounts.

A narrative approach to data analysis is grounded in the presumption that the stories we tell about our lives are invariably constructed through reworking wider social narratives. Although nuanced differently by groups and individuals, these narratives frame the practices we enact to produce our identities and relationships (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008). The four friendship-making practices in the NTE identified were evident throughout the stories our interview participants told about drinking in the NTE. Nonetheless, I have attempted to convey some of the diversity of participants' accounts.

Producing and affirming intimacy

Much of the pleasure of drinking alcohol for young people is about enjoying camaraderie with friends (Brown and Gregg, 2012; Szmigin et al., 2008; Törrönen and Maunu, 2011; Townshend, 2013). For young adults in the study, a big night out involved meeting up and going to venues with friends, becoming intoxicated together, and sharing stories about what happened in the days that followed.

Illustrating the importance of friendship to being in the NTE, none of the 60 participants in our study mentioned visiting a club or bar alone. Most spoke of regularly going out with the same

group, often involving same sex friends. Polly (23), for example, generally went out with a group of women friends, accompanied by a changing cast of boyfriends: '... our core girl group and then there's all the add-on boyfriends and guy friends'. Kyle (20) tended to go out with members of an extended group of friends whom he had met in high school and who lived near him:

Like we all grew up together. There's only really one circle of friends... Like depending, who's out and about, [we are] always in the same group. Like everyone's friends with everyone really.

Nights out for young adults frequently start with pre-drinking sessions, usually at someone's house but sometimes at a bar. Pre-drinking provides an opportunity to consume cheap packaged alcohol (MacLean and Callinan, 2013). It also reinforces intimacy within a group of friends which helps people feel safer later in the night when they are together in large crowded venues (Wells et al., 2009). Katie's account of a pre-drinking gathering was typical of those made by other interviewees in our study:

I'll meet up with people before generally, and like drink together at someone's house. Generally a group of ... five to ten people. And then we'll go out and probably be meeting other people (23).

Drinking alcohol together seems to enable friends to affirm their relationships through generating a different sociality to that which is possible when sober. In a study of alcohol use and friendship in New Zealand, Patricia Niland and co-authors (2013) argue that young adults spending time with friends who were drinking felt alone when they themselves were not consuming alcohol. In our study, many people spoke about disliking going out with friends who did not drink. Trent (18), who only drank infrequently, said that he felt a greater sense of belonging when he did drink alcohol with members of his sport team than when he did not.

It is often observed that alcohol's disinhibitory effect facilitates transgression of the normal rules of social interaction (Griffin et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2013; Sulkunen, 2002). Study participants noted that being drunk provided a warrant to talk about things that otherwise

could not be said and to move their bodies in a way that would be not be possible if they were sober. When drunk, they were open to enlivened engagements with each other through connecting with new people and dancing. Anita (23) described her perfect state of drunkenness as ‘...being able to dance and talk to people, talk to new people. And I guess I’d be a little bit crazy’.

Affinity between friends is maximised when both internal affective states of intoxication as well as drinking enaction (the physical act of consuming drinks in tandem with others), were aligned (see Törrönen and Maunu, 2011). This was repeatedly expressed by participants as being on ‘the same level’ and as ‘keeping up’. As Clara (20) explained, people experience fun differently when they are drunk and thus she tries to keep people in her group at a similar state of intoxication:

I think when you are really drunk you sort of want everyone to be on the same level, you want everyone to be having fun. So if you see someone that looks a bit more sober and they don’t seem to be having a great time, I think you might be inclined to sort of try and convince them to drink more so everyone’s on the same level.

Naresh (23) found it important to ‘keep up with the pace’ with his friends, which they achieved through buying rounds for each other. Edith’s (19) friends would shout her drinks to get her to a similar state of intoxication as their own. For Mitchell (23), drinking slowly so that he did not keep up with his friends felt ‘disrespectful’. Thanh (24) was explicit that keeping pace with his friend’s drinking enabled him to demonstrate allegiance: ‘When you keep on drinking with your friend and you not stop, it’s like I feel loyalty to my friend, close to them, yeah’.

Big nights out were narrated into the shared history of participants’ friendship groups as part of the ongoing story of their connection. As Christine Griffin and colleagues write: ‘Sharing drinking stories that are collaboratively constructed plays a key role in young people’s social lives, binding their friendship groups together ...’ (2009: 461). Drinking events are narrated in face-to-face conversations (Tutenges and Sandberg, 2013), though recording drunken antics on mobile phones (Griffin et al., 2009) and via social media such as Instagram (Brown and Gregg, 2012). As in other research, our interviewees talked about the importance of not missing out on

social events. This anxiety is sufficiently widespread to have garnered a name. 'FOMO' (fear of missing out) is a contemporary term for anxiety experienced when people are absent for events. The sense of friendship cohesion that people gain from nights out together is evident in Clara's reflection that staying at home when her friends went out would be bad because she would then be absent from accounts of the night: 'You're gonna miss out if you stay in and everyone's going out drinking, having a good time. You miss out on some stories'.

Demonstrating trust

Most participants felt strongly that being with a group of trusted friends was critical when they were out at night, emphasising how important it is to pay attention to their friends' whereabouts and wellbeing. As Ling (18) explained: 'Everyone stays in their group and makes sure everyone's okay.' Lachie (18) usually went out with a group of men he knew from school and tended to keep them in sight through the night. Like most women in the study Honey (24) insisted that she and her friends always made sure everyone got home safely: 'Getting home is a big thing. If someone is quite drunk you know everyone will watch them and make sure that it's okay. Yes, we really look out for each other'.

This provision of protection and safety in the NTE underlined trust between friends. Marco (21) expressed this clearly when he differentiated the care he showed to friends who had been part of his life for many years from that which he felt he owed a 'random' stranger:

We help each other. Like we always buy each other stuff like drinks and we just help each other whenever we need. 'Cause you know, I wouldn't do that to like a random [unknown person], you know, unless like that person really needed my help. But it's just 'cause we grew up with each other [that we do that].

Ryan (23) valued his friends because they demonstrate loyalty and care when they are out together at night: 'If someone's not having a good night, if they're feeling crap, there'll be someone to look after them.'

It is common for people to feel uneasy or fearful in the bars and clubs that are the mainstay of the NTE (Pain, 2001). The sense of anxiety generated through constructions of city entertainment precincts as risky appeared to provide a backdrop against which participants were able to demonstrate the mutual trust that Pahl (2000) sees as the hallmark of modern friendship. Participants who generally attended venues marketed to a same sex-attracted clientele spoke less about feeling vulnerable in clubs and pubs but were nonetheless concerned about homophobic abuse on the streets around venues and preferred not to travel through these places on their own.

The loss of control implicit in becoming drunk exacerbates many people's sense of vulnerability in the NTE (Rúðólfssdóttir and Morgan, 2009). Study participants often spoke of only feeling safe to become very drunk when they were with their close friends, which in turn functioned as a further sign of trust in them. Like others, Parvani (24) believed that she was safe to lose control with her best friends because they knew her well enough to detect when she was drunk and respond appropriately. Providing care for friends who were drunk allowed Sol (21) to demonstrate that he could be trusted to protect his mates. In the quote below, Sol indicates the reciprocity of this arrangement and suggests that getting very drunk so as to require care from friends is part of the point of going out, rather than an unfortunate consequence of it:

Once you get past a point [of intoxication], there's nothing you can do unless you have a really good friend with you who takes care of you. Like: 'Hey, don't do this!' And like: 'Have more water'. Like you know: 'Sit down; don't piss anyone off', or whatever... We encourage people to get drunk, but once someone gets drunk we will help them, like take care of them. Like you know, make sure he doesn't do anything stupid. Like you keep an eye on him, make sure he gets back home. So that's kind of nice. That's why we actually hang out, like why we go out together instead of just going out alone.

As in other research (Sheard, 2011), women in our study were particularly anxious about becoming intoxicated to the point where they could not protect themselves when they were out at night, frequently mentioning concern about having their drinks spiked with drugs. Women appeared, moreover, to believe that they themselves were responsible to manage risks

to their safety (De Crespigny and Vincent, 1999; Ferris, 1997). Hence, women particularly emphasised their reliance on friends when they were out at night. Reflecting a finding in Scandinavian research on gendered drinking patterns (Simonen et al., 2014) Edith (19) believed that women were much more likely to look after their same sex friends than men were: 'Everyone's watching out for each other when it's all girls. But when its guys, just they don't care about you and you don't care about them.' Nonetheless, some men including Lachie, Sol and Ryan also spoke of being protective of their friends in the NTE at night and all the men in the study saw as it their role to look after a girlfriend or boyfriend if they had one.

For Pahl 'It is axiomatic that friends should not betray each other' (2000: 61: 61). As a result of the importance of trust in friendship, being let down by a friend was very distressing and could wreak damage to these relationships. Natalie (19) preferred to go out with more than one girlfriend to reduce the risk that the friend would 'hook up with someone' (go home with a man) and abandon her. This had happened to Emma (21), whose comment conveys her sense of breached trust: 'The shit thing was that she left me by myself in the street; I had no one to go home with and I was really scared.'

Negotiating the parameters of the relationship

Nights out with friends often entailed making complex agreements about how to travel to entertainment precincts, what they would do and not do while at venues, and how they would return home. Agreements were usually devised during a pre-drinking party or while travelling to a venue. They were formulated in the knowledge that people might well do things when they were drunk that they otherwise would not. Friendship seemed to offer research participants some insurance against the anticipated irrationality and irresponsibility of their intoxicated selves. Devolving responsibility for their own care to friendships served to further constitute these relationships as real and protective.

Women in the study tended to be more comfortable both making agreements about their responsibility to friends when they were out at night and, as we shall explore in the next section, intervening when people appeared to be at risk of harm. Jade and Natalie (18 &19), for

example, always agreed to call each other on their mobile phones if they became separated while out. Sienna (23) and Honey planned how they would get home safely together.

Women's agreements with each other very often entailed a commitment to stop each other from a drunken liaison with a new sexual partner. In the quote below Amy (18) describes the set of agreements she makes with her friends before a big night out, which include this provision:

It's like: 'Don't let me go home with someone; you don't go home with someone. If someone seems like they're pestering you, come over' ... 'Don't go to the bathroom alone, don't leave the club without, you know [telling me] ...Don't leave your drinks [where they could be spiked]'.

Men in the study were generally much less likely than women to discuss agreements with friends who they went out at night with. They frequently regarded this as unnecessary because agreements were tacitly encoded in mutually understood rules of friendship. Some women also felt this way. As Scarlett (23) described: 'I guess it's sort of like an unspoken buddy system. When you're out with friends you kind of expect them to keep a tab on you and you keep a tab on them.' Riley (21) felt that it was the role of a mate to say 'Oi, you've had enough, pull your head in.' but saw no reason to talk about this in advance with his friends. For Arif (21) the rule was always unspoken; 'Just to take care of each other, that's, that's pretty much it.' Trent and Aiden (both 18), said that they looked out for each other but that they never talked about it. Marco (21) operated from a particularly autonomous model of friendship. He didn't discuss agreements or see it as his role to intervene in what his friends or other people did: 'We just do our own thing. We just don't get in people's way. People don't get in ours. That's it. '

Providing care while managing tension between autonomy and responsibility

Friends expect that they should care for each other when they are drunk (Niland et al., 2013), but at the same time provision of care within friendship must be managed carefully so not to intrude on the autonomy of either the friend who is cared for, or the friend who does the

caring. Providing care for a drunken friend was a moment where relatively uncoded expectations of friendship meant that relationships might be damaged, rather than strengthened through people's actions. Disputes over whether she was right to tell a drunken friend to go home had led to people in Emma's friendship group refusing to speak with others for long periods of time. Some research participants resented friends who had truncated an evening when they became so drunk as to need to be taken home (see Niland et al., 2013) or who could no longer engage sociably with them (see Törrönen & Maunu 2007). To manage the potential to offend a drunk friend, some described non-confrontational means of intervening to stop them drinking more, by buying the friend a soft drink or suggesting that they all go home. Lachie quietly hid a set of car keys belonging to a friend who wanted to drive while drunk, returning them surreptitiously the next day.

Mindful of the risks of excessive drinking, a proportion of participants, again frequently women, took an overt approach. When Katie thought her friends had had too much alcohol she would 'tell them to go home'. Edith (19) would 'drag [her] friends away from men' when they were drunk and would also take their beers and pass them to people who seemed less intoxicated. Carolyn (21) was similarly forceful in her action when a friend was drunk:

I think we normally just grab the person and sit them down and force water in them and usually send them in a taxi. So I think we take a more brutal approach. Just, yeah, we kind of get angry, but in a good way.

Participants who did intervene in friends' drinking reiterated that it was the closeness of the relationship that allowed them to do this. Alice (19) didn't find it uncomfortable to suggest that someone had had too much to drink because: 'I only tell my close friends and we've been close for many years.'

The limit to friends' responsibility and authority to look after each other was tested when people contravened agreements about what they would do during the night that they had made earlier on when they were sober. For women, enforcing agreements about not 'hooking up' with new sexual partners could be particularly awkward. Zara (18) said she would shoot her friend Carley (20) a funny look if she reneged on an agreement not to go home with a man, and

then let her do whatever she was going to. Clara and Fleur (19) were interviewed together. If Fleur hooked up with a man despite their mutual agreement not to do so, Clara would make sure the man looked reasonably safe. She noted, however, that it could be hard to intervene: 'You generally just let them get on with it, if it doesn't seem too dangerous. Yeah, it's hard to stop someone when they're drunk.'

Fewer of the men in the study said they'd try to stop a friend drinking. Only one spoke of intervening in a friend's drunken sexual encounter, in this instance because the friend's advances to a woman appeared unwanted. A couple of the men interviewed laughed about using felt pens to draw on the bodies of others who had passed out from drinking too much. Zara argued that women tended to care for other women, whereas some men would encourage each other to get drunk and do funny things:

I know my close guy group, they are really good with each other like we [women] are.

But generally I'll see some boys and they, you know they're sitting back laughing at their friend who's making an idiot of them self or getting them self into trouble.

Although they were less likely to stop each other drinking men would, however, support each other to deal with the consequences of intoxication. Ethan's (18) friends would help him manage being very drunk: 'My mates will help me walk, get me water, just the normal stuff you do'. Hayden (18) said his friends would help him if he looked very drunk but wouldn't say anything to him about stopping drinking. Andy (18) saw it as his responsibility to make sure no one bashed or stabbed a friend who had passed out.

Fighting is an entrenched part of the NTE in developed western nations, with more serious violence often perpetrated by men (Levine et al., 2012). As in other research (Lindsay, 2012) the majority of men interviewed for our study were anxious about being drawn into fights and made plans to ensure that this would not happen. Paul would tell his friends to: 'Pull your head in and come back with me' if they looked about to fight someone. Lachie spoke of advising his friend to 'Get over it' when an ex-girlfriend turned up with another man and he was worried that a fight would ensue.

Nonetheless, men in the study who had been involved in fights almost invariably spoke of doing so to help a friend. Some would only do this if they considered the fight to be unfair. Trent would first try to break up a fight first and only enter to defend his friend if that didn't work or if his friend was outnumbered. In contrast Dave (21) said that he and his friends would always 'jump into' a fight to defend each other. Marco explained that he preferred not to go out with his friends when their girlfriends came too because he would feel compelled to help his friends defend a slur against or sexual approach towards a girlfriend made by another man. Randall Collins (2008) writes of drunken violence as a means by which men may perform a narrative of a good night's entertainment. For men in our study, joining friends in fights seemed to enable them to enact a constitutive narrative of friendship without the risk of violating the terms of the relationship that questioning a friend's drinking or drunken behaviour would entail.

Discussion

Pahl (2000: 171) observes with rhetorical flourish that 'Friendship is the archetypal social relationship of choice and ours is a period of choice - of clothes, style, fashion and identities'. While Pahl may have overstated individual autonomy in the contemporary era, sociologists tend to agree that friendship is patterned by social contexts and that it is central to most young adults' sense of their place in the world. Expectations of friendship inevitably exist. Nonetheless, friendship is defined by institutionalised rules to a lesser degree than other important relationships in our lives are. This means that friendship must be sustained through active practices of relationship affirmation, negotiation and care, and by avoiding overstepping the relationship's relatively poorly defined boundaries (Allan and Adams, 2007; Pahl, 2000; Rawlins, 1992; Smart et al., 2012).

In epidemiological models, alcohol use is understood as having 'influence' or a 'contagion' effect involving the transmission of drinking patterns and attitudes between friends (Fujimoto and Valente, 2012b). I have argued that young adults' drinking should be understood rather as part of a broader social process; the contemporary constitution of friendship, which occurs through the continuous enactment of culturally- and historically-specific friendship-making practices.

Drinking alcohol enables people to constitute friendship through generating intimacy. For many, the affinity generated through drinking together is enhanced when their drinking is in synch with that of their friends, and the importance of 'keeping pace' to demonstrations of friendship may explain some of the concordance between individuals' drinking patterns and those of their friends that is identified in epidemiological studies. Telling stories about and posting images of drinking antics on social media serves to affirm friendships, perhaps by providing a semi-public record of the intimacy that constitutes these relationships. Being drunk in the settings of the NTE produces a sense of risk that further underlines young adults' friendships as relationships of safety and trust. Knowing someone well is critical to feeling comfortable to become very drunk with him or her, to a friend's capacity to detect that someone is excessively intoxicated, and, for some, an authorisation to intervene to protect the friend's safety. To manage risk of harm in the NTE and the uncertainty about the responsibilities involved in friendship, participants in this study negotiated agreements about how they would care for themselves and for each other.

The provision of care is both a responsibility of friendship and also a point where friendship can be damaged. This is further complicated by dissonance between the desires of the sober and drunken selves that friends are caring for. Many participants were anxious not to intervene to protect a friend's safety in a way which might be perceived as intrusive. Conversely, others were angry and hurt that care which was due to from a friend was not provided. Friendships were also eroded when people felt that responsibilities had become burdensome, for example when someone repeatedly became so drunk as to ruin others' nights.

Friendship and gender

Although women's alcohol consumption patterns in western countries are drawing nearer to those of men (Järvinen and Room, 2007), women's and men's experiences and expectations of drunkenness still seem to differ. Research in the UK suggests that young women are more likely than young men to believe that they should constrain their level of intoxication and that they feel a greater sense of personal responsibility to protect their own safety (Griffin et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2013; Sheard, 2011).

Women's same-sex friendships appear to entail more self-disclosure about sensitive or difficult matters and are more supportive than men's (Bank and Hansford, 2000; Demir and Orthel, 2011). The friendships that our research participants described enacting through drinking reflected gendered characteristics. Women generally found it easier to discuss and agree on how they would look after each other in the NTE. They were more likely than men to feel comfortable suggesting to their friends that they should moderate their drinking or that they needed go home, although a smaller proportion of men also felt that this was an appropriate role for a friend. Other men would help manage the consequences of a friend's intoxication, rather than seeking to prevent it. Due to their greater proclivity for intimacy, women's friendships seemed to protect them from harm in the NTE to a greater degree than men's same-sex friendships did.

Women in our study needed friends in the NTE because they often felt unsafe. They were aware that they were vulnerable to sexual coercion or making unwise decisions about men when they were drunk, and hoped (or at least expressed hope) that their friends would restrain them from doing something they might later regret. In contrast, men in the study did not think their male friends required protection from sexual liaisons and tended to fear becoming embroiled in fights with other men rather than any threat from women. Heterosexual men's lesser sense of vulnerability reduced the importance they placed on reliance on friends and their need to make agreements with each other about safety at night. Alcohol use provides a means by which men may perform a hegemonic masculinity in social settings (Peralta, 2007) and this has been linked with heavy drinking and violence. In our study, some men felt beholden to 'jump into' fights to defend their mates. These men seemed to believe that entering fights would not undermine a friend's autonomy in the way that telling him that it was time to stop drinking for the night might. Thus, these men's enactments of masculine friendship increased their likelihood of becoming perpetrators or victims of violence.

Changing friendship enactment as a means of reducing alcohol-related harm

Rates of alcohol-related assault and acute intoxication for young adults in the NTE have risen in Australia and other western countries in recent years (Livingston, 2008), prompting a search for effective interventions. It was striking that all participants in the study wanted to be seen and to see themselves as a good friend. This desire appears to motivate much of how they managed themselves during night time drinking occasions. Appealing to people's desire to constitute friendship may be a lever for reducing alcohol-related harm in the NTE.

The epidemiological and sociological models for understanding friendship and alcohol use for young adults explored here suggest contrasting implications for policy and intervention. If drinking pattern concordance between friends is a result of influence that individuals have over each other, or even of 'contagion', convincing individuals that heavy drinking is unadvisable might by implication change the behaviour of their friends. If, however, part of the pleasure of consuming alcohol is the opportunity to mutually enact, test and affirm important friendship relationships, the task of reducing risky drinking becomes much more complex. Niland et al. (2013) argue that risk based harm minimisation messages may not resonate with young adults if they think about alcohol use as a means of maximising the pleasures of sociality. We may strengthen this argument by adding that such messages may not work because for many young adults drinking alcohol together provides an effective means of mutually sustaining highly valued relationships.

Although they exist between individuals, contemporary friendships are deeply embedded in the social conditions of late-modernity. This suggests that the imperatives that drive friendship; to experience sympathetic chosen relationships with others, will be very difficult to change through public health interventions. It may be, however, that friendship-making practices are more open to modification. One way to do this might be to encourage practices that are already present among young adults and which seem to reduce harm, such as the provision of care for friends. At the same time we might seek to discourage practices that seem to exacerbate harm, for example drinking to intoxication in tandem with others.

As I have observed, Pahl (2000) suggests that friendship is largely unbounded by external rules. More recent friendship research, however, describes cultural norms about the behaviour of friends that are shared across social networks and among groups of people sharing similar demographic characteristics (Badhwar, 2008; Bryant and Marmo, 2012). Social norms also govern intoxication and how any person enacts the state of being drunk. Some research participants were worried that getting too drunk would damage rather than enhance friendships. Health promotion interventions might encourage an 'ethics of moderation' (Duff, 2004) whereby people seek a level of intoxication which will maximise their capacity to connect with and maintain a concordant affective state with friends, thus enhancing pleasure and minimising risks to friendship. Such interventions might emphasise how getting extremely drunk can impair friendship and undermine the mutuality of the experience. As with other social mores, constraints on aggressive behaviour remain in place even when people are quite drunk (Levine et al., 2012). Many men in the study did not believe that the best way to be a friend when someone got into a fight was to join in. Social norms supporting the appropriateness of pulling friends out of fights might be encouraged among those men who currently believe that entering fights is the optimal way to demonstrate affinity. Programs or activities to support men in developing intimate and close friendships where self-disclosure and agreements about care are accepted might help men to develop more protective relationships with each other. Nonetheless it should be borne in mind that education campaigns on their own are rarely associated with long-term reductions in alcohol use or related harm (Babor et al., 2010).

The connection between alcohol use and friendship-making practices provides a strong impetus for young adults' alcohol use. Indeed, an understanding of drinking as friendship constitution may help to account for the persistence of heavy episodic alcohol use among young adults despite years of effort by public health authorities to dissuade it. This adds weight to the consensus among alcohol researchers that external controls on alcohol availability should be part of any overall harm reduction strategy (Babor et al., 2010). Buying each other rounds in venues is one means by which people achieve a similar level of intoxication to their friends,

sometimes leading to heavy drinking (Knibbe et al., 1993). Prohibiting sales of multiple drinks to one person at venues might impede this dynamic. Although it is rarely prosecuted, alcohol vendors in many parts of the world are liable if they sell liquor to an already-intoxicated person who goes on to commit an alcohol-related offense (Babor et al., 2010). Laws in USA states instantiating 'social host liability' have been associated with decreased drink driving for lighter drinkers, but not for those who consumed more heavily (Stout et al., 2000). Perhaps friends should likewise be held liable for harms that result when they deliberately encourage someone to become extremely intoxicated. The risk here, however, is that such legislation may have limited impact on heavier drinkers, or even add to the transgressive pleasure that is part of becoming acutely intoxicated for some young people. At the least, interventions should be designed to work with the imperatives of friendship rather than against them, as others have argued occurs when public health education injunctions denouncing drunkenness inadvertently contribute a new frisson when friends recount intoxicated nights through social media (Brown and Gregg, 2012).

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Biography

Sarah MacLean

is Senior Research Fellow in Social Health Determinants in the Centre for Health Equity Unit at the University of Melbourne. Much of her research has explored young people's experiences of alcohol and other drug use, particularly involving inhalants. This paper draws on Sarah's postdoctoral research on alcohol. Co-authored publications from this project focus on differences in patterns, cultures and harms from alcohol use across urban settings (in *International Journal of Drug Policy* and *Urban Policy and Research*), pre-drinking (in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Primary Health*) and strategies young adults use to limit alcohol consumption (in *Contemporary Drug Problems*).

Address: Centre for Health and Society, University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia, E-mail: smaclean@unimelb.edu.au