

The Gendered Trouble with Alcohol

Young People Managing Alcohol-Related Violence

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Drug-related violence is probably more likely to occur while under the influence of alcohol than any other drug. In this Australian study, Jo Lindsay discusses alcohol-related violence and the management of these acts from the perspective of young adults in Australia. Among other issues, Lindsay focuses on the gendered dimension of domestic and public spheres in which violence occurs, and the challenges for males who wish to avoid violence while attempting to uphold their masculine identities.

Introduction

Alcohol-related violence is a disturbing element in the social lives and relationships of many young people in post-industrial societies. The development of the night-time economy where young people are encouraged to drink heavily in entertainment precincts has increased the risk of violence in recent decades and alcohol-related violence is the subject of ongoing public and professional concern and policy interventions (Babor et al. 2010). This paper analyses the drinking biography interviews of a sample of young Australians (aged 18–24) and argues that the concept of gender performance is important for understanding experiences of alcohol related violence and for developing effective policy in this domain.

As public concern about alcohol related violence has increased in Anglophone countries in the last few decades the research literature offers an

increasingly sophisticated account of the complex relationship between alcohol and violence. The importance of social and situational context for understanding drinking and violence has been highlighted (Babor et al. 2010). Particular patterns of excessive drinking and violence have been linked to specific formations of gender and class.

Excessive drinking has been traditionally linked to displays of a macho version of masculine identity alongside engaging in barroom aggression and violence. Men as both perpetrators and victims continue to engage in drunken violence and suffer injuries at much higher levels than women. Young men who drink to intoxication are particularly vulnerable to experiencing violence (Hughes et al. 2008; Laslett et al. 2010; Wells and Graham 2003). Some research from Britain and Australia has found that drinking and violence is linked to working class versions of masculinity—where drunken violence

becomes a protest to petty authoritarianism at venues and middle-class values of respectability (Hayward and Hobbs 2007; Tomsen 1997). Yet research from Canada and the US has found drunken aggression and violence is common amongst some middle-class groups including male university students (Graham and Wells 2003; Wells et al. 2007).

Research from the UK has also found more diverse connexions between masculinity and drinking than what the heavy drinking male stereotype would suggest (de Visser and Smith 2007; Mullen et al. 2007). In recent years there has been some recognition that female-female violence is also a serious issue—though it takes different forms to male-male violence (Day, Gough, and McFadden 2003; Forsyth and Lennox 2009).

Like public violence, intimate partner violence or domestic violence is also associated with intoxication. However, women are substantially more likely to be victims of partner violence than men (Graham et al. 2008; Hegarty et al. 2000). Intimate partner violence is recognized as a major public health issue which, despite the advances of second wave feminism, remains common and is apparently intractable (Hegarty et al. 2000). There is a substantial body of research on the links between alcohol consumption and experiences of violence (Klostermann and Fals-Stewart 2006), but research which examines the links between public and private violence is sparse.

Important explanations for alcohol-related violence include the physical and social context of public drinking venues and cultural values and expectations about the acceptability of violence (Graham and Wells 2003; Homel et al. 2004). Triggers of violence include defending honour, reputations or face saving, addressing grievances, impulsive or emotional reactions to perceived threats and fighting for excitement and enjoyment (Graham and Wells 2003).

Graham and Wells (2003) suggest that young men in Canada define themselves on a continuum from “self-proclaimed non-fighters” who avoid fights to the “recreational fighters” at the other end of the continuum who jump into fights without hesitation. There is relatively little research on the understandings of drinking and violence by the

majority of drinkers at the “non-fighting” end of the continuum—those who do not engage in violence on a regular basis but work to avoid it (Mullen et al. 2007).

Policy interventions to reduce public alcohol-related violence commonly focus on public drinking venues and night-time entertainment precincts. Interventions include responsible beverage service, server violence prevention training, licensee accords, raised enforcement of licencing regulations and multi-level interventions (Brennan et al. 2011). However there is only limited evidence that these interventions work (Brennan et al. 2011). Server training courses and multi-level interventions which combine law enforcement with community mobilization and self-regulation by licensees show the most promise (Loxley et al. 2005; Warburton and Shepherd 2006).

Policy interventions targeting domestic alcohol related violence are primarily reactive rather than preventative and include the coordination of service provision and improved police responses to domestic violence (Junger et al. 2007). Broader policies aimed at enhancing pro-social development in families such as provision of early childhood services and programmes aimed at building relationship skills and parenting skills could also be seen as relevant to reducing alcohol related domestic violence. However, evaluation data from these programmes is scant (Junger et al. 2007).

This paper takes a novel approach by examining stories about violence articulated within mainstream young people’s drinking biography interviews. The aim is to analyse these personal histories and contextualize alcohol related violence within the lives of young people living in Victoria, Australia, and the social landscape they inhabit and draw out the implications for alcohol policy.

Theoretical Approach

A broadly interpretive and social constructivist approach is taken in this paper where participants own interpretations of their experiences are collected and analysed. A dynamic understanding of gender relations undergirds the analysis. Masculinities and femininities are understood to be plural and socially constructed; they are linked with

struggles for social power and embedded in institutional settings (Connell 2002; Tomsen 2008). In particular, a complex understanding of masculinity is important to both understand the strong association between masculinity and alcohol related violence but to also avoid essentializing violence as a “natural” expression of masculinity (Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010). Masculinities are complex expressions of identity that are linked with particular socio-spatial contexts and include official masculinity, respectable masculinity, protest masculinity, threatened and queer masculinities and so on (Carrington et al. 2010). Recent research has identified mainstream types of masculinity which value a disengagement from violence which has high relevance to this paper (de Visser and Smith 2007; Tomsen 2005). In summary, this paper focuses on a sociological reading of the interview data which sees gender as a dynamic social construction.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger project entitled: “What a Great Night: The Cultural Drivers of Alcohol Consumption.” The project was a tender for the provision of qualitative and quantitative research into the cultural drivers of risk taking behaviour and their affects on “low risk,” “risky” and “high risk” use of alcohol amongst 14–24-year-old Australian drinkers funded by Drinkwise and the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. The rationale for the research was to provide nuanced information on why different groups of young people consume alcohol in high-risk, risky or low-risk ways and provide knowledge for developing effective public health interventions on youth drinking in Australia. The aim of the drinking biographies study was to (a) gather life course information about drinking to identify “low risk,” “risky” and “high risk” alcohol consumption settings and contexts; and (b) examine drinking trajectories and identify cultural drivers (or triggers) of change between different patterns of drinking for experienced young drinkers in their early 20s. The project received ethics approval from the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics for Research involving Humans (SCERH).

This study involved 60 individual, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20–24-year-olds in Melbourne (metropolitan city), Geelong (de-industrializing city) and Warrnambool (rural seaside town) in 2008. These sites were chosen to provide a sense of the range of experiences of young people living in Victoria. Our sample was purposive in that we aimed to speak to a diverse range of young people over the legal drinking age in Australia. We aimed to sample an equal number of males and females and a balance between people who study or work full time. Whilst there are many documented issues around alcohol use at university, we wanted to explore the drinking biographies of young people in a variety of contexts. We attempted to recruit people from universities, shopping centres and snowballing, asking participants to pass on our contact details to their friends.

Sixty semi-structured interviews (26 males, 34 females) were conducted. Whilst we were able to achieve a strong gender balance across our three locations, we were less successful at recruiting non-students. Most participants were recruited from universities, with fliers posted on notice boards and handouts in lectures (73% studied full-time, 20% worked full-time and 62% worked part-time). The majority of participants spoke English as their first language and were born in Australia. We did not collect more detailed data about ethnic background unless participants mentioned this in their interviews. In summary, this is a qualitative study that does not claim to be statistically representative but is large enough to provide an insight into mainstream social practices by young Victorians.

Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire was utilized to collect demographic data and included some multiple choice and ranking, as well as open-ended questions about alcohol consumption. The questionnaires were primarily used as a vehicle for eliciting narratives and participants were encouraged to retrospectively discuss their introduction to alcohol in their family lives growing up, throughout their time as young children, during high school, their experiences within their social groups and the role alcohol

played beyond high school during their transition into University or full-time work. The interviews were conducted by either a research fellow or a research assistant at the participants' homes or at a University and lasted one to one and one-half hours. The interviewers were both female and were older than the research participants in the study (one in her 30s and one in her 40s). It is not clear to what extent the participants shaped their answers to be socially acceptable to the interviewers—we might assume that they would downplay negative aspects of their drinking and portray their current practices in a positive light yet the transcripts involve detailed descriptions of the pleasures and problems of alcohol consumption experiences over time. All participants were offered two movie tickets for their participation.

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed in full and coded using NVivo, qualitative analysis software. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality. The analysis reported in this paper focuses on the ways in which alcohol related violence is represented by these young people, the way they tell their stories of past experiences and imagined futures. As the interviews were designed to gather information on young people's drinking biographies rather than specifically about violence, we can assume that violence was only salient for the people who mentioned it. Perhaps more experiences with violence may have been reported if we had asked participants to discuss specific incidents—instead we asked them to describe the place of alcohol in their social and family lives at various time periods (as a primary school child, in secondary school and since turning 18) and comment on the extent to which alcohol played a positive or negative role in each of these periods. However, when violence was mentioned the interviewers did probe further to get a full account of specific incidents and outcomes. For this paper the transcripts were read in full, and text searching and counting cases was used to identify themes. The transcripts were searched by the author for terms such as "violent," "fights," "arguments," "unhappy," and "negative experiences" and coded. Surrounding sections of the interviews were re-read in detail to contextualize

the themes. Negative case analysis was then used to determine the relative strength of themes.

This qualitative study offers an insight into the experiences of alcohol related violence by "mainstream" young people and provides textured information not currently captured in available research.

Findings

Thirty-three of the 60 participants discussed alcohol related violence in their drinking biography interviews. The most common experience of violence recounted was observing violence whilst out socializing at pubs or clubs (21/60). A substantial minority discussed avoiding violence (9/60) and experiences of family violence (9/60). Less common experiences of alcohol-related violence were participating in fights (4/60 discussed this) and making efforts to stop fights (3/60).

The stories about violence and responses to it were highly gendered and also spatialized. Similar numbers of women and men talked about observing violence whilst out socializing (10 men and 11 women). However, men were more likely to discuss strategies for avoiding violence (9 men, 0 women) and being in fights (3 men, 1 woman). By contrast family violence and fights with partners were more likely to be female concerns (mentioned by 8 women and 1 man). These findings align with the literature on gendered violence in public and private domains (Graham et al. 2008; Hegarty et al. 2000).

Avoiding Violent Men in Violent Places

Most of the mainstream participants discussed their negative views of violent people and their ongoing assessment of violence prone locations. Observing public violence was reported equally by the young people living in each of the three sites—Melbourne (large metropolitan city), Geelong (deindustrializing city) and Warrnambool (a rural coastal town). Although conclusions on prevalence cannot be drawn from this small sample, the participants who lived in Geelong described the existence of a male fighting culture in that city. For example, Billy, a 23-year-old construction worker, supported the introduction of ID scanners in pubs and clubs to "make people accountable" because

there were “too many fights” going on. He described how there were some men in Geelong wanting to “make a name for themselves” via fighting which is a crisp description of men in this small city struggling for social status at a time when workplace opportunities for working class men are in decline. Jim, a 20-year-old university student, spoke in similar terms about “idiots who want to fight you” in Geelong but he did not identify masculine struggles for status or reputation but instead seemed puzzled by the causes of violence and described public fighting in Geelong as “unnecessary,” “senseless” and “frustrating.”

Young people living in Melbourne also talked about violence around pubs and clubs in negative terms. Benn, a 22-year-old full-time university student, described how “some people get into fights when they drink” and found these outbreaks “disturbing.” Catherine, a 21-year-old student, talked about violence as an irritating and banal backdrop to going out in Melbourne. She reported the need to avoid socializing with people who fight: “I don’t like violent people, I hate violent people.” She was sceptical of security staff and proactively called the police when fights erupted.

CATHERINE: If I go to X Street on a Saturday night there’s always a fight and that’s the same like in the city as well. This place that I go [in the city] there’s always some dickhead [idiot] and then the security guards always fight. And I always call the police.

Q: The security guards fight each other?

CATHERINE: No but it’ll just be like some person gets kicked out. I can’t stand security guards, they’re just so violent and just crazy, so I just call the police. I hate seeing people fight, I hate seeing people hurt like just really makes me sick. And it’s really sad, like people go out to look for fights, like it’s just it’s so unfair and then that person that gets trapped in it. And then it’s probably you know have brain damage or something by the end of it and then it’s just all fucked up. . . . I wouldn’t hang around with violent people.

Young people living in Warrnambool also described similar instances of observing and making

efforts to avoid violence. Donald, a 20-year-old electrician, described how he saw a lot of fights at clubs and tried to stay away from them. Pete, a 20-year-old hospitality worker, talked about an area of the rural town of Warrnambool between two night clubs that has been nicknamed the “Gaza strip” because of the frequent fighting that went on there.

Two notable themes emerge from these everyday stories of observing violence whilst out socializing. Firstly, the male gender of both the perpetrators and potential victims of public violence is taken for granted. Men appear to be more active than women in assessing violence and developing detailed strategies to avoid it—this will be discussed in more detail below. Although the women dislike violence as much as the men in this study, they appear to be positioned as bystanders to it rather than potential victims. Secondly, in the accounts given in this research there is a notable social distance between these mainstream participants and the people engaging in public violence—apparently the “people who get into fights” or “dickhead at the pub” are not friends or family members or known to participants.

Performing Masculinity and Avoiding Violence

Many of the young men who discussed violence in this research spoke of the necessity of developing strategies for avoiding violence. Maintaining a masculine identity whilst desisting from violence was a complex process because one dominant expectation of masculinity involves “standing up for yourself” rather than “backing down” (Carrington et al. 2010; Tomsen 2005). According to the male participants in this research there was an ongoing threat of victimization from “dickheads at the pub” or “people trying to make a name for themselves” and assert their masculine authority. They reported that in the social settings of pubs and clubs fights were frequently initiated on some pretext or other. Some male participants suggested that a useful way of avoiding being caught in violent situations was to cultivate positive friendship networks with other men and stay close to their friends in pubs and clubs.

For Zack, a 22-year-old construction worker who lived in Warrnambool, avoiding clubs was the best strategy for avoiding violence. He described how he does not like nightclubs because there are always fights and "alcohol tips people over the edge."

John, a 24-year-old student who also lived in Warrnambool, discussed in depth strategies of self monitoring and bodily management he uses to avoid violence. John grew up in a lower socioeconomic area of Melbourne which he described as "pretty rough" and he had a family history of a father who gets violent when drunk. He reported only drinking beer when he goes out "because I know I can control beer."

JOHN: Well, I learnt very quickly how not to act drunk when I was drunk, so it's your body language and stuff like that. So the way that you look at people, so when you know that you feel that you're a certain drunkness. How and when not to look at people. Where you position yourself in the room, and who you surround yourself with—like, you know, you always got to a point where you always had your back up against the wall in case you got bottled or something like that. . . .

Q: Yeah, yeah.

JOHN: So it was always, you know, the way that you carry yourself in the area or where your friends were. You always knew if your friends were over here, your friends were over there, there was one guy over there. You always knew how the crowd shifts, you know? It was just—it was pretty weird. Like I talked to a lot of friends out here and everything like that and they never had friends who got stabbed or friends who got bottled or friends who went to hospital and, you know. Yeah, it was very bizarre, it was just the way I grew up. I guess in the areas that I grew up it was pretty rough—rough areas.

As John has made a transition from his working class milieu to interacting with fellow university students he has come to recognize that his experiences of violence and the necessity for conflict avoidance skills are particular to the disadvantaged and

"rough" socio-spatial context where he spent his teenage years.

Men Fighting in Public

Only four of the men in the research talked about participating in fights. Three of these men described how they were unfairly victimized by other young men who were not known to them. The examples discussed by these four men were positioned in the past—they had occurred a number of years ago suggesting perhaps that fighting is the preserve of younger men (under 20) who have not yet developed avoidance strategies.

BILLY: Me and a mate [friend] were out—this was [when we were] a bit younger—but out in town and just walking down the street and mate's about this big on me, so he's not much of a threat to anyone.

Q: A bit shorter?

BILLY: Yeah, just walk along, minding our own business, got the crap kicked out of us [beaten up] by a group of about 15 people, crossing X Street, and just all stupid stuff like that, every week, and there would always be somebody trying to beat up someone else, just because they thought they would. Geelong is the worst for that.

Q: Really?

BILLY: Everybody trying to get out there and make a name for themselves, because they think it's a small town, but I suppose you get it everywhere.

Only one man, Pete, a 22-year-old student who lived in Warrnambool, talked about asserting himself in drinking settings though he downplayed his participation in fights and emphasized that these incidents were fleeting, inconsequential and in the past. He talked about the risk of "getting clobbered" [punched] whilst out socializing but saw his own participation in fights as playful aggression.

PETE: I got the occasional one or two sort of where someone might have whacked me a bit and I'd sort of turn around and sort of whack them in the arm back or something, but . . .

Q: Nothing?

PETE: Nothing really sort of a punch up.

Q: And so it's not violence, like a bit aggression or sort of . . .

PETE: Yeah. Just a bit of stirring.

Q: Argument?

PETE: Yeah, argumentative just like oh, this one's better than this and that sort of thing.

Q: Yeah.

PETE: There was never any sort of full on pounding the hell out of someone like.

Descriptions of pride in being tough or winning fights were notably absent in the interviews. Instead the young men's descriptions of unfair victimization and necessity for avoidance strategies were more prominent in the data.

There is one contrasting example in the interviews of men being frequently engaged in violence and this is described second hand in the interview with Jessica, a 20-year-old university student from Melbourne. Jessica had little experience of violence prior to meeting her current boyfriend. She spoke about socializing with her boyfriend and his friends who she describes as unruly football players—"feral footy boys." The men frequently get into fights and the themes of male solidarity in the face of perceived threats, turf protection from rival groups and resulting confrontation with security guards and police are part and parcel of a good night out for them. Jessica can understand her boyfriend's logic of supporting his friends when fights break out but dislikes the negative outcomes for her. She particularly dislikes being "kicked out of clubs." Jessica's experiences are a vivid example of the spillover of violence onto intimate partners. Jessica had not had intimate violence directed towards her but was annoyed by having to play the role of moderating and soothing girlfriend to a man who was frequently involved in street fighting. Though she supported his masculine strategy of "standing up for your mates" in principle, her description of resentment about the interruption violence brings to her social life suggests that her patience and support for these displays of masculinity may not be ongoing. Jessica described the collective practices of masculinity by her boyfriend in the socio spatial context of being part of a local football club in an outer Melbourne

suburb but these experiences stand in strong contrast to the efforts to avoid violence described by the majority of the sample.

Women Managing Male Violence in Public

In this research women were just as likely as men to observe public violence and were not always passive in the face of it. They often tried to dissuade their partners and friends from fighting and three of the women in the sample talked about actively intervening to stop alcohol-related fights. As described earlier, Catherine, from Melbourne, hates violence and takes a proactive stance by calling the police when she witnesses fights outside nightclubs. Sally, a 23-year-old student and university residence assistant in Warnambool, also reported frequently taking on the role of breaking up fights. According to her, one successful strategy is to offer alcohol as a reward—"Stop fighting and I'll buy you a beer." This strategy would dismay most public health practitioners who advocate limiting the supply of alcohol to already intoxicated patrons but for Sally it is a useful way of mollifying angry men and defusing heated exchanges.

In contrast to usual gender stereotypes Leena, a 22-year-old trainee policewoman, previously had a job breaking up fights as a bouncer at a pub.

LEENA: If anyone ever hit me, I'd smack them back. So I don't think anyone would ever dare to.

Q: But were you ever around other people who were fighting and stuff?

LEENA: Yeah but it was only at the pub. Everyone else was drunk and I was working.

Q: Oh OK. And you had to kind of deal with that did you?

LEENA: Yeah I had to get into a few fights because that was my job.

Q: Did you? Yeah. To break them up? Or to get in them?

LEENA: To get in, and break them up, and leave. I loved it.

Similar to research on UK women working as bouncers in the night time economy, Leena was happy to engage in physical violence in addition to

the more traditionally feminine role of “peacekeeper” (Hobbs, O’Brien, and Westmarland 2007).

In the interviews alcohol was frequently described as a causal factor in male violence though there were no examples given of alcohol causing women to be violent. According to Mary, a 21-year-old student, “drinking brings on aggression in boys.” Sexual jealousy and men fighting over women emerged as a minor theme. For example, John from Warnambool said that the key ingredients for a fight were “females and alcohol.” In these instances violence is apparently a gender performance to impress women observers and frighten off potential competitors.

In other contexts the presence of women was observed to have a civilizing effect. Kate from Melbourne observed that “boys were less likely to fight” when there was a higher ratio of women to men. In the next section I examine alcohol related violence in domestic settings.

Managing Male Violence at Home

It is well established in the literature that experiences of domestic violence are mediated by gender in pronounced ways; men are the most common perpetrators and women are the most common victims. In this research family or relationship arguments and/or violence was mentioned by eight women and one man. For most of these participants avoiding violence meant steering clear of their drunken fathers and attempting to avoid antagonizing them. None of the participants described currently being in violent family situations.

Two female participants reported a long history of violence in intimate and family relationships and had taken dramatic steps to change or avoid it in the future. For example, Natalie was a 23-year-old woman from Geelong who studied full-time and worked part-time. She was in a committed relationship and planning to get married. Alcohol had played a volatile role in her family life and had led to violence and fighting and general unhappiness over the years. Natalie rarely drinks these days because of her new-found Christian faith and her negative childhood memories and her own bad experiences drinking too much a couple of years ago.

In the interview Natalie discussed her colourful upbringing in a family owned pub before her parents separated. Her family “all still drink and enjoy to drink.” She recalled the distress caused by family violence and verbal abuse by her father towards her mother even after her parents had separated.

NATALIE: It’s when they step over that mark with an extra glass of scotch and coke that it turns really unhappy and in tears and violent, . . . if they’re drinking they’re happy and it’s all good and then they turn violent, like that’s the last thing that you’re going to remember so . . . Yeah. I think my family just don’t know when to stop drinking, like you can hit a point where you’re really happy and believe you’re tipsy but they just want to keep going and going and going and that’s where it’s stupid, like it’s quite embarrassing or whatever.

Between the ages of 16 and 20 Natalie drank regularly and sometimes heavily and had a few negative experiences throwing up, passing out and almost being sexually assaulted herself. In more recent years Natalie has changed her socio-spatial context through meeting a new partner, shifting towns and now socializing with Christian friends. Alcohol now plays a very small role in her life: “My whole life has kind of transformed differently so it’s not an issue at all.” Her Christian faith has given her much to live for and it has allowed her to develop new social networks, “a whole new social scene,” and create some distance with her family.

Kristie had also dramatically changed her socio-spatial context to avoid family violence. Kristie, age 21, lives in Geelong and has two young children, and she studies part time. She recalled lots of alcohol-related violence and trouble across most of her life. Her stepfather who she grew up with was a “violent drunk” and the children’s father was also “a jerk” and would become violent when drunk. According to Kristie most men she knows “turn nasty when they drink.” Kristie has turned her life around and moved interstate to escape “her drunk and violent ex” and at the time of the interview had a non-drinking partner.

It is notable that both of the women experiencing more extreme alcohol-related domestic violence had made determined efforts to avoid further family violence by dramatically changing their socio-spatial contexts; moving towns and changing their networks and socializing with non-drinkers.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research found that alcohol-related violence is problematic part of the social and family lives of many young people (about half of the sample) but is not a salient feature for all. For the participants in this research who spoke about violence, most described it as something to be observed cautiously and avoided where possible.

A gendered reading of alcohol-related violence is extremely useful in understanding patterns of victimization and avoidance in this research. Young women and men frequently socialize together in the night-time economies of industrialized countries such as the UK and Australia, and some gender convergence in drinking patterns and alcohol related harm can be observed (Babor et al. 2010). Yet the men and women in this research remain differently positioned in relation to the performance of drunk and violent expressions of masculinity by some men in both public and private spheres. Women were observers of public violence and potential victims of family violence whilst men were observers and potential victims of public violence from unknown perpetrators.

Although this research draws on a small sample, there was little evidence of adherence to or observation of a widespread culture of violence. In contrast to some research on barroom violence or violence in the night time economy there were no stories about enjoying the spectacle of fighting or masculine self-expression or pride in participating in fights (Graham and Wells 2003; Tomsen 1997). The violent contexts described in this research were to some extent socio-spatially located. The words “rough” or “tough” were sometimes used to describe working class areas and in particular participants from Geelong (a de-industrializing city) spoke about the local drinking culture there in negative terms. But looking across the data participants from each of the research sites—Geelong,

Melbourne and Warrnambool—were just as likely to report observing public fighting at clubs and pubs and the university students were as likely to have experienced public violence as the non-professional workers.

This study has a number of limitations. Violence may have been underreported because the interviews were designed to elicit drinking biographies rather than focus specifically on violence. The limited discussion of their own participation in violence and the tendency to frame incidents in the distant past rather than the present may also reflect perceptions of social desirability in the interview context resulting in violence being underreported. However the detailed interviews do offer a window to the social worlds of the mainstream where avoiding violence is a priority for both young women and men.

The key findings of this research, that alcohol-related violence is centrally about performances of masculinity and is socio-spatially contextualized, have important implications of policy development. Public violence is not fully grasped by commonly used gender neutral explanations of “young binge drinkers”—instead the targets of interventions should be particular performances of masculinity. Some men are perpetrators and most men are potential victims whilst women are usually positioned as observers rather than active agents in public alcohol related violence. The data reported here, alongside findings from other research, suggest that minority performances of masculinity are the primary problem of alcohol related violence (Tomsen 2005, 2008). Most mainstream young men, like those in this sample, actively avoid and desist from engaging in violence (de Visser and Smith 2007; Mullen et al. 2007). Masculine performance is also important for understanding violence in domestic settings. The gender-neutral term “intimate partner violence” deflects attention away from problematic performances of masculinity in domestic contexts where women are the central victims. As Tomsen has argued in his work on masculinity and crime, there is a need for education and promotion of diverse and non-violent masculinities amongst marginalized boys and men (Tomsen 2008). Interventions aimed at performances of masculinity which

take social inequalities into account are potential preventative solutions to alcohol related violence in both public and domestic settings.

A focus on problematic masculinities can also assist the targeting and delivery interventions at public drinking venues. There is less need to monitor women as they are unlikely to be perpetrators or victims of public violence (at least in the Australian locations studied here). This research also suggests that to create drinking contexts where avoidance and desistance from violence are valued it would also be worth hiring bar and security staff who model peaceful rather than violent masculinities as reported by some of the participants. Currently instead of policy effectively targeting the minority expressions of violent masculinity the potential victims—mainstream men in public and women in private—must assess, manage or avoid violent socio-spatial contexts for themselves.

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