

Emakunde SARE conference “Masculinity and daily life”, November 2007

Young men, masculinity and alcohol: Insights from qualitative research

Richard de Visser, University of Sussex

R.De-Visser@sussex.ac.uk

[slide 1]

There is widespread concern about the health and social consequences of alcohol consumption among young men.[1] In the short term excessive alcohol consumption can lead to alcohol poisoning, and increases the likelihood of accidents and injury, as well as increasing the likelihood of being a perpetrator or victim of violence

Much of the attention paid to young men’s drinking behaviour has focused on binge drinking. Binge drinking is by no means restricted to young men, but in the UK and other Western nations young adult men are more likely than other people to binge drink.[2-4] Concern about excessive alcohol consumption among young men demands an understanding of why some young men drink excessively while other men drink moderately or not at all. Such information may facilitate the development of interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm.

[slide 2]

Drinking behaviour is influenced by a range of demographic, social, and attitudinal variables. For example, white British teenagers are more likely than their black and Asian peers to have ever drunk alcohol, and use alcohol regularly.[5] Drinking varies as a function of ethnicity and religion, but there is an important interaction between ethnicity and religion: ethnic minority youth are more likely to drink if they have friends within their ethnic community who drink and/or friends outside their ethnic group.[6]

In the general population, binge drinking is associated with lower socioeconomic status (SES),[7-8] and unemployment has been found to contribute to the development of problem drinking.[9]. However, among young adults there is less consistent evidence for a link between measures of SES and binge drinking,[2,10,11] probably because these men are in a transitional phase when measures of SES are subject to change.

Gender is another potentially important line of enquiry which can be conceptualised at both an individual level and a social level. Research frequently examines sex differences (male/female) in drinking behaviour, but not gender differences (masculine/ feminine). Such research cannot determine whether masculinity influences why some young men drink excessively while others do not. However, there is a need for such information, because although gender is an important influence on health-related behaviours - with traditional forms of masculinity are associated with poorer health outcomes.[12]

[slide 3]

Although different discourses of masculinity exist, many men endorse and aspire to 'hegemonic masculinity', the dominant discourse of masculinity characterised by physical and emotional toughness, risk taking, predatory heterosexuality, being a breadwinner, and so on.[13-14] Elements of hegemonic masculinity are commonly set up in binary opposition to their alternatives, so that anything other than the hegemonic form is immediately non-masculine. The social behaviours that are evaluated as masculine or non-masculine include behaviours for which there are clear gender stereotypes (e.g. paid work, domestic labour), but they also include health-related behaviours.[12]

Whether or not a man engages in particular health-related social behaviours such as alcohol consumption therefore has implications for his masculine identity. As a result, young men's definitions of drinking as masculine, and the importance to them of being considered to be masculine may influence their drinking behaviour. However, the existence of non-hegemonic modes of masculinity makes it important to examine the links between different forms of masculinity and different patterns of alcohol consumption.

[slide 4]

The sample for the study described in this presentation consisted of men aged 18-21 living in London, England. A sample diverse in both class and ethnicity was recruited via stratified purposeful sampling. Men with higher socioeconomic status/opportunity were recruited via notices on two university campuses in central London. Men with lower socioeconomic status/opportunity were recruited via advertisements placed in employment centres and a local newspaper in an area of inner east London characterised by high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage (based on infant mortality, adult and youth unemployment, proportion of population receiving government benefits) and a substantial non-white population. The sample included similar numbers of students and un(der)employed men. Half were white, and there were equal numbers black and Asian men. Respondents were not recruited for a study of drinking, but a study of social lives and health. Thus, there is no reason to assume that respondents had unusual patterns of alcohol consumption or unusual orientations toward hegemonic masculinity.

Semi-structured in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 31 men to examine subjective experiences of the links between masculinity and alcohol consumption.

Five group discussions were conducted involving 27 men, 13 of whom also completed individual interviews. The group discussions were conducted to examine social ideologies or discourses of masculinity and alcohol consumption.

[slide 5]

The analyses of data from the individual interviews and group discussions were combined. The group discussions and individual interviews produced complementary data: each of the emergent themes was apparent in both sets of transcripts.

Three major themes were identified: "equation of drinking with masculinity"; "trading masculine competence"; and "no link between masculinity and drinking".

[slide 6] Equation of drinking with masculinity

Most respondents acknowledged that drinking, and drinking large amounts of alcohol, is generally equated with masculinity. Participants in the group discussions were asked how masculinity is defined by young men. The following response from a group of Asian students neatly sums up what was also said in other groups

[slide 7]

- Arjuna: I think masculinity ... if you're, if you're in university that is, sort of, the drinking culture, the casual sex, and the drug taking I suppose.
- Adi: Yeah.
- Rahul: I mean, you just look at ... like, popular culture kind of things and movies and things like that. If you just take certain characters who are regarded as ... -
- Arjuna: - Icons -
- Rahul: - really icons of masculinity who go out and booze, and get in fights, and get lots of women and stuff like that, they are regarded as ... the prime kind of, you know, specimens of maleness.
- Arjuna: And guys get, kind of, ranked or split into categories on how well they can handle their drink, how they are with the ladies, how much drugs they take.

Key elements of masculinity identified by study participants include drinking, drug use, sex, and fighting. Young men are competitive in these domains, and rank their performances: the more they drink, the more highly they are regarded. In an individual interview, Tim (white, student) noted that “there’s a lot of machoness about, about drinking”, emphasising that men who drink a lot feel more masculine and are regarded as more masculine than other men.

The importance of drinking for masculinity was also noted by un(der)employed men. Lester (black, unemployed) noted that men must not only drink, but be able to hold their drink. He emphasised the links between drinking and having a good time, and not spoiling this fun by throwing up or passing out. Lack of competence as a drinker will result in ridicule:

[slide 8]

- Lester: There’s an expectation to drink and get drunk, or to drink and, like, have a good time. Maybe not to be roaring drunk or whatever in the corner, but yeah, there is an expectation to drink, and to be able to hold your drink as well.
- Int:* Yeah. So holding your drink -
- Lester: - is important.
- Int:* What, um, what would happen if you couldn’t hold your drink? What would the kind of response be, do you think?
- Lester: Um, taking the piss out of you for throwing up, or falling asleep, or whatever.

Although men did mention consuming wine and spirits, there was a general consensus that beer drinking was central to masculine alcohol consumption. Andrew (white, student) said “When I say ‘a drink’ I mean a pint”, and Charles (black, unemployed) said “When I say ‘a drink’, I mean like ... a series of pints”. Most men who drank noted that the majority of their

alcohol consumption was beer, with other forms of alcohol consumed less often. Drinking beer was important for perceptions of masculinity:

[slide 9]

- Tim: If there was a guy in first year or something who doesn't drink beer it'd be like ... either he's gay or he's -
- Marco: - It's quite -
- Jack: - Probably.
- Charlie: We were in the Union last night, weren't we, and because wine was cheapest we were drinking wine.
- Jack: We were drinking wine.
- Charlie: But it felt like ... not masculine.

Not only is drinking wine rather than beer non-masculine, but such behaviour may lead to questioning of masculinity in other domains - men who do not drink beer may be suspected of being homosexual. This suggests that although there are several domains in which masculine competence can be displayed, non-masculine behaviour in one domain may lead to a more general perception of non-masculinity. Thus, as suggested in the introduction, men's drinking behaviour has implications for their masculine identities. However, some men noted that the potential evaluation of a man as less masculine because he does not drink can be countered by exemplary performance in other masculine domains. This second theme of trading masculine competence is discussed in the next section.

[slide 10] Trading masculine competence

[slide 11]

Participants in group discussions were shown a colour magazine advertisement for a non-alcoholic sports drink which showed English Rugby Union star Jonny Wilkinson drinking the advertised product with the ironic caption 'Like most rugby players, Jonny Wilkinson is a big drinker'. The text is ironic because Wilkinson does not drink alcohol, thereby not conforming to the stereotype of the masculine beer drinking rugby player. Participants debated whether Wilkinson's abstinence affected his masculinity:

[slide 12]

- Will: But do you think Jonny Wilkinson is any less of a man because he doesn't drink? I mean, he's a national hero!
- Jack: He's still a one trick pony.
- Will: He didn't have a pint in the pub after he won the World Cup.
- Tim: Yeah, that's a bit lame I think.
- Charlie: But he's got a really fit girlfriend.
- Tim: Yeah, he's got other things, which kind of lifts him back up again.

Will suggested that even though Wilkinson did not join his team-mates for a celebratory beer following their World Cup victory, his masculinity cannot be questioned because of his sporting success. Charlie added that the fact that he has an attractive girlfriend further emphasises his masculinity, rebutting any claims that his abstinence diminishes his

masculinity. However, Tim's second remark neatly points to how Wilkinson's non-masculine abstinence is excused or allowed by his masculine competence in other domains - on the Rugby field and having an attractive girlfriend - it 'lifts him back up again'. Thus it appears that masculine competence can be traded to compensate for lack of competence or a disinclination to engage in certain masculine behaviours.

This process of trading competence was also described by Rahul (Asian, student) who, like Jonny Wilkinson, was able to use sporting prowess to compensate for a 'non-masculine' disinclination toward drinking:

[slide 13]

Rahul: ... because I was better than most of the players, they didn't, like, pressure me into drinking, because ... you know, it was kind of like I could say to them 'Forget it', or whatever. Um ... that was, that's personally me, but then I have friends who ... weren't quite as experienced as me at hockey, but just to kind of get into the group I think they felt the need to partake in that.

Int: Mm-hm. So you were kind of able to ... because of the skill and being a good hockey player, there wasn't so much pressure to?

Rahul: Pretty much, yeah.

Here Rahul describes how his masculine sporting competence made it less likely that others would construe his disinclination to drink excessively as evidence of non-masculinity. However, he noted that men who are less good athletes may try to compensate for this by gaining credit in the pub.

[slide 14]

Trading of masculine competence was further examined when group participants were shown a photo of Will Young, the openly gay winner of the UK Pop Idol competition. The photo - taken from a magazine fashion special - showed Young wearing a £190 shirt and £215 trousers and holding a half-empty bottle of expensive champagne. The initial response in most groups was reference to Young's sexuality, with the addition that he is not masculine because he is gay

However, some men noted that if they did not know that Young was gay they would say that he is portraying a particular form of sophisticated heterosexual masculinity - the playboy:

[slide 15]

Arjuna: If you didn't know who he was -

Adi: - He looks like a bit of a ladies man, actually -

Arjuna: - yeah, you would think he was a bit of a ladies man. The fact of the matter is when you see him on TV you can tell he is camp. You may not know he is gay, but you can tell he was camp, which in my mind that lowers his masculinity.

In this interpretation of the image, masculinity is linked to financial success and heterosexual competence. Thus, although this was a potentially masculine image, most men noted that the

combination of Young's homosexuality, a concern with appearance and the consumption of champagne (rather than beer) made it non-masculine:

Tim: It is a bit gay that he's standing there with a bottle of champagne. I mean, if he had a pint of lager in his hand, then it would be a really different perception that you would have of him.

Charlie: That's true. That's true.

It is likely that respondents' knowledge of Young's sexuality and his source of fame (pop music rather than rap, rock, sport, or action movies) influenced their perceptions of his masculinity. Therefore, they were asked to imagine the same photograph, but with England football captain David Beckham's face in the place of Young's. Beckham's sporting prowess allows him to lead a glamorous lifestyle. He, like Young, is very conscious of his appearance and uses changes in style - hairstyles, sarongs, nail varnish, etc. - to attract media attention:

[slide 16]

Int: *So what if that was, what if that was David Beckham's head on that picture, with everything else the same?*

Adi: You'd be pretty much -

Rahul: - Yeah, but that's why I don't think it's - Look at David Beckham, he wears skirts and stuff like that and does his hair in braids and stuff. How can you class him [Beckham] as more masculine than him [Young]?

Adi: Well it's not, again, it only comes back to where he -

Rahul: - His perception is because he -

Adi: - It's because David Beckham plays football.

Because Beckham's reason for fame is football (masculine), and because he is heterosexual (masculine), his non-masculine focus on his appearance can be excused. In contrast, being a gay pop singer is not seen to be masculine. From the discussions of Jonny Wilkinson, Will Young and David Beckham, and Rahul's description of his own behaviour, it is apparent that competence in one traditionally masculine domain may be used to excuse non-masculine behaviour in other domains, but that it may not be possible to compensate for all non-masculine behaviours (e.g. homosexuality). However, it is important to note that the patterns of behaviour associated with 'trading masculine competence' still entail an acceptance that drinking is linked to masculinity.

[slide 17] Rejecting alcohol / emphasising alternatives

The third theme differed from the first and second because it involved a rejection of the importance of alcohol consumption for masculine identity.

Several men - some of whom drank, but most of whom did not - presented an alternative mode of masculinity in which drinking is not valorised, and in which individuality, rationality, and integrity are deemed to be more important determinants of masculinity. For example, in the group discussion extract below, Emeka notes the importance of individuality and independence as key elements of his masculine identity:

[slide 18]

Int: ... do you think that affects your impression of how masculine he [Wilkinson] is as a non-drinker?

Emeka: No. Because I don't drink, and I feel as masculine as the next guy who does. I feel even more masculine, because I feel that I'm not succumbing to pressure.

Patrick: Yeah.

Emeka: And I'm being independent whereas they're just doing it because, like, it's seen as, like, they're just copying the trends. Whereas I can take a stand and say "No, I don't". So I can feel more masculine being a non-drinker.

However, Emeka (black, student) echoed statements made by Rahul and about Jonny Wilkinson. He noted that his abstinence would not be as easily excused if he was not a better football player than most of his peers. In an individual interview, Emeka emphasised how important integrity and resisting peer pressure are to his masculine identity:

[slide 19]

Emeka: [My friend] never used to drink when he was, like - Because he went off to university, but before he went to university he never used to drink. And then one time when I went to visit him ... he was knocking back pints like he was a pro. And I asked him 'What? Do you drink now?' And he was like 'Yeah.' And I was like 'Why?' And he was just 'Well, just everyone around me was just drinking and I just felt, like, left out.' So he said he started drinking just because of that. And I was thinking, like, 'What a fool!'

Emeka suggest that an immature or insecure masculinity is linked to excessive alcohol consumption. Najib (Asian, student), another non-drinker, noted the importance of individuality and integrity, but also emphasised public decency as an important element of masculinity - a marker distinguishing men from boys:

[slide 20]

Najib: Why do you have to be like, you know, like a sheep and follow everyone, you know. Does it have to be like that? I know ... it's not me trying to be different, it's just me seeing stuff in a different sort of ... form, I'd say. It's like I don't see that as a norm - I don't find that a decent way to be, going out, getting drunk. I don't find that to be decent.

However, Najib noted that his position with respect to alcohol did expose him to social criticism. He noted that if he tells new acquaintances that he does not drink "they'll give you a strange look, like 'you don't drink - Are you gay?'" Thus, his personal experience matches the statements reported earlier whereby abstinence leads to questioning of masculinity in other domains, especially sexuality.

Although he had an Islamic family background, Najib was not a devout Muslim. Azim (black, unemployed) described the influence of his Islamic beliefs on his behaviour, but he gave greater importance to his faith, and he did not drink:

[slide 21]

Azim: I'm a Muslim guy, you know, and if you are Muslim you are not allowed to drink. And I'm a guy that, you know, I pray, you know. I pray and so I don't drink. I never, I never tried to drink either.

Muslim men such as Emeka and Azim stressed the importance of individual choice and responsibility for one's actions. Although his religious beliefs shape his behaviour, ultimately Azim - a rational, decent, mature man rather than a boy - is responsible for his behaviour.

Azim Basically ... you know, if you want to do something, there's nobody's going to stop you doing it. You know what I'm saying? It's up to you. You know, if they - that thing's going to hurt you, it's not going to hurt me, you know.

The men described above endorsed an alternative form of masculinity that was still based on traditionally 'masculine' characteristics such as rationality and independence. All of these men rejected a link between alcohol consumption and masculinity: they were all non-drinkers or moderate drinkers who emphasised the importance of other "masculine" characteristics and behaviours.

[slide 22]

Recent studies of masculinity and social behaviour suggest that health-related behaviours such as alcohol consumption may be an important resource in the social construction of a masculine identity.[12-14] This study revealed three major themes relating to alcohol consumption and masculinity.

The first theme "equation of drinking with masculinity" described how many men equate masculinity with particular patterns of alcohol consumption - i.e. drinking beer, being able to drink a lot.

The second theme "trading masculine competence" was aligned with the first theme as it linked masculinity to alcohol consumption, but addressed the ways in which alcohol consumption relates to competence in other 'masculine' domains. The theme 'trading masculine competence' is important because it has clear implications for health education and health promotion. Rahul and Emeka noted that the esteem gained from being a good athlete made it easier to resist pressure to drink, while still maintaining a masculine identity. The flipside of this position is that some men may use excessive alcohol consumption in efforts to enhance their masculine status. This process echoes the findings in previous research that men may turn to unhealthy and/or antisocial masculine behaviours if other means of gaining 'masculine' credit are not available.[15,16] The finding that men use masculine competence in domains such as sport to excuse a disinclination toward drinking suggests that encouraging healthy 'masculine' behaviours such as sport will provide health benefits, and may also reduce the potential harms associated with alternative health-compromising behaviours used for constructing masculine identities. However, it should be recognised that such an approach encourages individuality and competitiveness rather than collective action to improve men's health. In addition, it is important to note that such an approach reinforces, rather than challenges, the gendering of health-related behaviours.

[slide 23]

The third theme “no link between masculinity and drinking” differed from the first two themes, being characterised by a resistance to associations between masculinity and drinking, and a focus on other masculine characteristics.

Some men in the current study rejected associations between masculinity and drinking, and instead endorsed a strong masculinity characterised by rationality, health, integrity, free thought, and resisting social pressure. Studies in other sociocultural contexts reveal that young men can develop a strong masculine identity while at the same time rejecting ‘masculine’ behaviours such as binge drinking, drug use, and predatory heterosexuality. For example, within the North American ‘straightedge’ youth subculture, the ‘masculine’ characteristics of rationality and control are favoured, while the ‘masculine’ behaviours of drinking, smoking, drug use, and promiscuous sex are denied and avoided.[17]

Although masculinity may be conceptualised as a problem because of links between hegemonic masculinity and excessive alcohol consumption, everyone should resist the urge to equate (young) masculinity with excessive alcohol consumption. This study shows that although particular modes of masculinity are linked to excessive alcohol consumption, other forms of masculinity are linked to abstinence or moderate alcohol consumption.

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that links between masculinity and health-related social behaviours such as drinking are not simple. Masculinity can be defined and enacted in different ways. It is not necessarily linked to unhealthy behaviour. Indeed, it is possible to draw an analogy between masculinity and alcohol. Used in particular ways, alcohol has health benefits.[18] Used inappropriately or excessively, it has clear detrimental effects.[1] Similarly, it is how young men define and use their masculinity (rather than how masculine they feel) that determines whether it will harm or benefit their health. The challenge for harm reduction strategies is to help men from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to develop masculine identities that do not entail harmful behaviours such as excessive alcohol consumption.

REFERENCES

- 1 Rehm, N., et al. (2001) Alcohol in the European region: consumption, harm and policies. Geneva: World Health Organisation.
- 2 de Visser, R., et al. (2006). Sociodemographic correlates of smoking, drinking, injecting drug use, and sexual risk behaviour in a representative sample of Australian young people. International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 13, 153-162.
- 3 The Information Centre. (2007) Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2007. London: The Information Centre.
- 4 Kuntsche, E., et al. (2004) Characteristics of binge drinkers in Europe. Social Science & Medicine, 59, 113-127.
- 5 Best, D., et al. (2001) Ethnic and gender differences in drinking and smoking among London adolescents. Ethnicity & Health, 6, 51-57.
- 6 Heim, D., et al. (2004) Alcohol consumption, perceptions of community responses and attitudes to service provision: Results from a survey of Indian, Chinese and Pakistani young people in greater Glasgow, Scotland, UK. Alcohol & Alcoholism, 39, 220–226.
- 7 Droomers, M., et al. (1999) Educational differences in excessive alcohol consumption: the role of psychosocial and material stressors. Preventive Medicine, 29, 1-10.
- 8 Moore, L., et al. (1994) Binge drinking: Prevalence, patterns and policy. Health Education Research, 9, 497-505.
- 9 Claussen, B. (1999) Alcohol disorders and re-employment in a 5-year follow-up of long-term unemployed. Addiction, 94, 133-138.
- 11 Muthén, B. & Muthén, L. (2000) The development of heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems from ages 18 to 37 in a US national sample. Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 61, 290-300.
- 12 Courtenay, W. (2000) Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: a theory of gender and health. Social Science & Medicine, 50, 1385-1401.
- 13 Connell, R. (1987) Gender & Power. Cambridge: Polity.
- 14 Connell, R. (1995) Masculinities. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- 15 Messerschmidt, J. (2000) Becoming 'real men': Adolescent masculinity challenges and sexual violence. Men and Masculinities, 2, 286-307.
- 16 Willott, S. & Griffin, C. (1999) 'Building you own lifeboat': Working class male offenders talk about economic crime. British Journal of Social Psychology, 38, 445-460.
- 17 Wood, R. (2003) The straightedge youth subculture: Observations on the complexity of sub-cultural identity. Journal of Youth Studies, 6, 33-52.
- 18 White, I. (1999) The level of alcohol consumption at which all-cause mortality is least. Journal of Clinical Epidemiology, 52, 967-75